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CENTENNIAL MUSEUM  
AND CHIHUAHUAN DESERT GARDENS  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

Celebrating Life in the Chihuahuan Desert

## Welcome

Daniel Carey-Whalen, Director

In early August, the group Death to Museums, a collective of Chicago-based museum professionals, held their first, virtual conference. The group and the conference focused on inequalities in the museum profession, and also on the biases held by museums, made even more visible during this pandemic and time of social upheaval. In part, this “burn the house down” ethos stems from Generation Z, the young people who will have to live with all of the previous generation’s struggles. Yet, this philosophy of equality and social justice has also been passed down by activists from previous generations. The debates of reform or revolution extend back through the last century with people fighting for the right to vote, equality under the law, and a right to live a decent life.

At the Centennial Museum and Chihuahuan Desert Gardens, we acknowledge these cries for fundamental change, yet we do not let go of the importance of museums and have faith in our own abilities to acclimate to the ever-changing world. In this newsletter, Sam Winer provides a brief insight into the history of art created to celebrate Spanish and Mexican “conquistadors.” Now, as calls for cultural sensitivity and the removal of monuments and murals increases, it is important for museums to look at why they were created in the first place and ask, “what should be done?”

Museums not only help us investigate our past; they also give us hope for the future. In Claudia Ley’s article on the collaborative program, UTEP Arts Alive, she highlights our amazing partnership with the Rubin Center and the College of Liberal Arts to create a series of performances in iconic places around UTEP that celebrate the arts and humanities. These museum projects bring us together, especially during this global pandemic, when we need it the most.

Even in this time of uncertainty, museums remain trusted institutions. We at the Centennial Museum and Chihuahuan Desert Gardens hope to continue to earn your trust.

Daniel Carey-Whalen



Weber Agave and a blooming Southwest barrel cactus.

## Museum Hours of Operation:

We are temporarily closed to the public until further notice. Florafest has been postponed until the fall of 2020. Please visit our [website](#) for more information.

- CENTENNIAL MUSEUM  
Monday through Saturday  
10:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M.
- CHIHUAHUAN DESERT GARDENS  
Open every day  
Dawn to Dusk
- LHAKHANG  
Every Wednesday and 1st Saturday of the Month  
11:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M.





## Memory and History

Samantha Winer, Curator

Change has been occurring across the country, affecting all sections of life. Yet, because of protests led by the Black Lives Matter movement, we are beginning to turn a critical eye to our history and reexamine what we thought we knew about race relations in the United States. Hispanic Heritage Month is the perfect time not only to examine the past of the borderlands but also the creation and manipulation of its history.

Most of us learn in elementary school that American History began in “1492 when Columbus sailed the ocean blue” and then we jumped to 1607 when the British established Jamestown in Virginia. Yet in the intervening years, Spain’s colonial ambitions reshaped much of the Americas in colonial Mexico and tension emerged between the Spanish and the indigenous groups. The Spanish religious orders eagerly eyed the northern frontier as an oasis filled with souls ripe for converting and for the conquistadors it held the possibility of silver mines, *encomiendas* (land grants), and great wealth. Inside the Centennial Museum’s entrance, a mural behind glass depicts the conquistadors riding valiantly across the desert. Painted in 1945 by Salvador Lopez, the mural portrays an indigenous man showing Francisco Vazquez de Coronado and his conquistadors how to eat a prickly pear and survive in the desert. In 1540, Coronado was accompanied by around 350 conquistadors, over 300 servants, and approximately 1,000 Indigenous natives to guide them to what they believed was the Seven Golden Cities of Cibola. Yet, during his journey, Coronado was known for using force and violence against indigenous tribes.

The question looming in the background is why are these men and deeds celebrated? It is important to remember that history is a tool used to claim legitimacy. The conquistadors have been used in the past by Mexicans and eventually by Mexican Americans to claim their place in the historical narrative because these men represent whiteness. Since the invasion, Mexico has a long history of prioritizing whiteness based on the *sistema de castas*, a complex system of racial castes. The *sistema de castas* combined biological, hereditary, and phenotypic beliefs about race that controlled social and political life in the public realm of the colony.



Francisco Vázquez de Coronado



The ideology placed Spaniards at the top of the sistema de casta. Later in the late 19th and early 20th century the conquistadors and their ties to Europe allowed many in the American Southwest to claim being of Spanish descent. This allowed many to proclaim their whiteness and claim legitimacy among Anglo Americans. Further, emphasizing their Spanish descent allowed Mexican Americans to destroy the notion that they were “dirty” and “uncivilized” Indians. To be Spanish was also a way to differentiate themselves from newly arrived Mexican immigrants at the turn of the century. To be of Spanish descent, ultimately to be “white,” was the goal.

Yet within the past several decades a shift has begun to occur. Mexicans and Mexican Americans are recognizing and celebrating their indigenous roots and acknowledge the layers of multicultural history. At the Centennial Museum we have created handouts to explain the history behind the mural but moving forward we must think about our next steps. Do we want to remove the mural, or permanently add a text panel that acknowledges its problematic message? We are beginning to realize how complex history is and that is something we should celebrate all year round.



The Conquistadors by Salvador Lopez

#### Works Consulted

Hall, Thomas D. *Social Change in the Southwest, 1350-1880*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1989.

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Nieto-Phillips, John M. 2008. *Language of Blood: The Making of Spanish-American Identity in New Mexico, 1880s-1930s*. Albuquerque: University Of New Mexico Press.

Olson, C. “Casta Painting and the Rhetorical Body”. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. 39, no. 4: 307-330, 2009.



## UTEPArts Alive on Campus

Claudia Ley, Education Curator

As we begin the fall semester with a mostly empty campus, those of us who come on campus from time to time might find ourselves able to better appreciate the landscape, Bhutanese architecture, and sculptures now. But there is no doubt that the energy students, faculty, and staff bring is what makes the University a much livelier place to be. With the Centennial Museum and the Rubin Center still closed to the public, both spaces have had to make unexpected changes regarding exhibitions and programming this fall. Through a conversation between both institutions, and the Music and Art departments, the idea to safely showcase the diversity and spirit of the arts and culture on campus during this pandemic came about.

The UTEP Arts Alive project will take place in September and October, highlighting ongoing artistic activities by UTEP students and faculty from a wide range of departments. Pre-recorded videos will take place at iconic campus locations such as the Rubin, the Centennial Museum and Chihuahuan Desert Gardens, the Lhakhang, and Centennial Plaza for those who cannot physically be present. Short videos will be launched at noon on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays beginning the week of September 14th, leading to a series of Facebook live events during Homecoming week (October 12-17th).

Arts Alive videos will feature musicians, artists, actors and dancers, as well as writers, historians, and other intellectual voices, speaking and performing from recognizable locations from across the UTEP campus. These short videos are intended for us to take an afternoon break to reconnect with arts, culture, and the UTEP campus itself. The videos will be broadcast across social media platforms throughout the university as well as collected as an archive on the website. Please visit our website and social media platforms for more information.



Arts Alive Logo



## Nopal Research and Hispanic Heritage

Kevin Floyd, Botanical Curator

August is usually the peak of the summer monsoon season, with rains and cooler temperatures bringing a second wave of flowers to our native plants. Unfortunately, we have yet to receive much rain at the Chihuahuan Desert Gardens this monsoon season. Even still, I am always amazed at how quickly some species responded to the few storms that did occur. Perhaps the plants that are best known for flowering with the rain are the *Leucophyllum*, commonly called Texas rain sage or Barometer bush. *Leucophyllum frutescens*, the Texas ranger or Cenizo, and its many cultivars are widely used in landscaping around town because they bloom prolifically and can survive being trimmed into the rounded mounds or cubes most of us have seen in commercial properties. We have *L. frutescens* at the gardens, along with eight other species of *Leucophyllum*. They look similar at first glance, but have unique flower colors, bloom



A Sonoran bumble bee visiting a Texas ranger (*Leucophyllum frutescens*) flower.

times, plant size and shape, and fragrance. Hopefully September will bring more rain than did August. If it does, wait a few days after the rain and then come check out what species are flowering.

Another sign of fall are the ripening prickly pear fruits, also known as *tunas*. These fruits and the young cactus pads, or *nopales*, are an important part of historic and contemporary Mexican food heritage dating back to the pre-Columbian indigenous communities. We are excited to bring a story about nopales and tunas from Carolina Franco as part of our celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month. Carolina is a multidisciplinary arts and culture community organizer, curator, and activist from the El Paso-Ciudad Juarez border. She is an active Board Member of NIENMORE in Ciudad Juarez and has previously served as a Board Member for the El Paso Museums and Culture Affairs Advisory Board, and as the President of the Board of Directors for La Mujer Obrera. She is currently handling Media Relations for SITE Santa Fe. Outside of her professional career she is just as passionate about learning and exploring gardening, cooking and textiles.



Chihuahuan rain sage (*Leucophyllum laevigatum*) blooming in the front of the museum.



Barometer bush (*Leucophyllum langmaniae*) covered with lavender flowers.



By Carolina Franco,  
Guest

Nopales have been a resourceful and delicious staple in our homes since the times of pre-Columbian trade. These cacti and their fruits were plentiful long before the founding of Tenochtitlan in the year 1325, when the Aztecs saw an eagle with its talons upon the *tunas* or *nochtli* (prickly pear). Nopal, or *nopalli* in Nahuatl, have over 200 different species and are considered a sacred plant in Mexico, along with the maguey and mesquite.



Each of the flowers that were fertilized develop into cactus fruits, or *tunas*.

Not only are nopales delicious, but they are highly versatile. To this day you will find nopales in a variety of dishes whether they are eaten raw, boiled, or grilled, as the main dish or as the side dish, for breakfast or for dinner. The tuna is sweet and oftentimes enjoyed as a refreshing summer beverage, turned into jams or honey, or added to your favorite margarita mix. The [tuna agria or xoconostle](#) is bitter and makes for a great salsa or salad dressing. Both the nopal and the tunas have great health benefits such as being antiviral, high in antioxidants, able to regulate blood sugar levels, and so much more.

The mucilago, often known as baba de nopal, is the slime-like consistency of the nopal. Mucilago has many properties and has oftentimes been used to heal cracked skin and treat wounds. When mixed with mud, clay, and straw it makes for the perfect glue for adobe.

Growing up, I remember my mother always craving *nopalitos* and sharing stories of when my grandmother would cook them for my mother and her siblings in Ciudad Juarez. Although my brother, sister, and I were not fond of the slimy green cactus pad, my love and appreciation for nopales flourished with time. So much so, that I became very interested in them and learned how to cultivate and work with nopales and their properties at [Tierra es Vida, La Mujer Obrera's Community Farm](#) in the Southside of El Paso. During this time I began to study grana cochinilla, *nochestli* in Nahuatl (cochineal), the scale insect that grows on the nopal and is used as a natural dye. Nochestli, when blended with different properties, can create a variety of colors ranging over 180 different tones.



Most of the flower buds on this plant had yet to open.

When getting ready to prepare your nopales, make sure to harvest the young tender pads (I suggest harvesting them between late spring and early summer). Young, tender pads are usually a bright green color, while the older pads have a grayish-green color. While harvesting nopales, I recommend using tongs and a knife due to their hair-like spines. Use a kitchen knife to remove all spines from the pads, rinse well and enjoy!



If you want to enjoy any of the *tunas* yourself, you need to protect them from animals. Northern mockingbirds and curve-billed thrashers ate most of the fruit on the plants in the gardens.



## Tacos de Nopal Asado con Verdolagas y Salsa de Chipotle

Serves: 6

- 4 Nopal Paddles (with spines removed)
- 2 Cups of Verdolaga leaves (purslane)
- ½ White Onion
- 2 Garlic Cloves
- 12 Tortillas
- ½ Cup of Fresh Chopped Cilantro
- 4 oz of Chipotle en adobo
- 6 tablespoons of Greek Yogurt
- 1 tablespoon of avocado oil
- Salt and Pepper to Taste\*

You can prepare this dish on an outdoor grill or stovetop.

Heat skillet and line with oil. While your skillet is heating up, rinse your nopales and pat them dry, drizzle them with a bit of avocado oil and sprinkle with salt. Place nopales on a hot skillet and let them cook for about 5 minutes on each side, or until they begin to char. Remove from the skillet.

Chop up onion and garlic and saute until they become translucent. Add verdolagas and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Chop your grilled nopales and add them to the mixture.

Mix chipotle sauce and greek yogurt, chop fresh cilantro, and warm up your tortillas in a comal.

Serve your tacos de nopales and verdolagas topped with chipotle sauce and fresh cilantro.



Engelmann's prickly pear (*Opuntia engelmannii*) has multiple orange or red flowers in the spring.





## *Agua de Tuna con Limon y Chia*

- 3 tunas peeled and rinsed
- Juice of 2 limes
- 1 Tablespoon of Chia
- 2 Liters of water
- ½ Cup of Monk Fruit

Wash and peel your tunas (prickly pear fruits). Once they are peeled, split them down the middle and scrape out the center. Blend your tunas with 4 cups of water then strain into a pitcher with remaining water, lime juice, chia, and monk fruit or sweetener of choice. Stir and enjoy chilled!



These fruits were probably a week away from peak ripeness.

# *¡BUEN PROVECHO!*

