Remarkable Ceramic Mosaic in Harlingen, Texas

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This is the story of a spectacular artwork comprised of 905 handcrafted ceramic tiles. It was created in 1975 by Raul Esparza Sanchez of Torreon, Coahuila, Mexico. It is now displayed in Harlingen, Texas' Centennial Park, 101 S. West Street, corner of Jackson Avenue.

How did this unusual artwork come to be created and find its permanent home in Harlingen? The answer begins with the artist. Raul Esparza Sanchez (1923-2001) was an accomplished muralist, sculptor, and oil painter. His works are widely exhibited in Mexico, the U.S, and China. They “are characterized by the bold use of color and by historical, regional, and rural themes.” He spent most of his life in Torreon where his murals are displayed in banks, hotels and public buildings of that city. Commissioned by the University of Coahuila, he produced one mural showing the origins and evolution of medicine, now in the School of Medicine, and a second, in the School of Commerce and Administration, showing economic activities from pre-Hispanic societies to the modern day. He considered his La Encarnacion in the Sagrado Corazon Church in Torreon to be his most important work. His huge tile mural of the Virgin revealed his talents to the world. It resulted in his being commissioned to compose a mural for the exterior of the California Museum of Science and Industry. Sanchez conducted extensive research before creating The History of Mexico and Mankind for the museum in Los Angeles. He set up a studio and kiln adjacent to the museum. In it he fashioned his masterpiece which was affixedto the museum's facade in 1975. Unfortunately the museum was to be superceded (and demolished) in 1984 by the California Science Center. The tiles of his work were removed and placed in storage— for ten years.

Lynn Keller, then curator of the Rio Grande Valley Museum in Harlingen, learned through a museum-orientated internet group that the tiles would be donated to non-profit organizations and immediately thought of the city's Hispanic heritage. By September 2000, the Harlingen Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and Harlingen Proud had convinced the Californai Science Center that Harlingen would give the mural a good home. Next they came up with funds of about $1,500 needed to ship the mural tiles sitting in ten large plywood crates weighing a total of 1,900 lbs. They arrived in Harlingen in October 2000. The completion of the project is largely credited to Cheryl LaBerge of Downtown Harlingen. With the help of Jaime Maldonado Fabian of Torreon, Sanchez was notified of his work's new home. He was very pleased and said "the mural is going to be near me now."

It then took nearly a decade before a suitable location was designated for the re-erection of the murals. This fittingly was in a newly-established city park named Centennial Park in commemoration of the city that was to celibrate the 100th Anniversary of its April 1910 establishment.

The mural has a series of nine panels. Each depicts a unique historic/societal perspective. The first is Origins of Ideas, Life, and the Universe. The second portrays Pre-Hispanic Cultures: Olmec, Aztec, Teotihucan, Mayan, Toltec, and Zapotec. Aztec and Mayan symbols represent the region's pre-Colombian legacy. The third depicts a Tomb Cover from the Temple of Inscriptions in Palenque, Chiapas. This artefact is nearly 1,300 years old. Fourth is the famed and often reproduced Mayan Calendar. Fifth is the Siege of Tenochtlan, Old Mexico City. Here one sees a depiction of Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes with Indian collaborator Dona Mariana. This represents the birth of the Spanish-Indian raza. Sixth is The Conquest and Independence of Mexico. Seventh is the Monument to the Liberators of the Americas. This panel includes portratures of Jose San Martin of Argentia, Jose Marti of Cuba, Simon Bolivar of Venezuela, Benito Juarez of Mexico, and George Washington and Abraham Lincoln of the United States of America. Eigth represents Peace and Unity. The ninth panel shows the Aztec Sun of Fire. To enlighten viewers the artist's description of his workis enscibed in granite in fron of each section. An additional plaque explians how Harlingen acquied the mural and provides
additional information.
Employees of Harlingen's Mion Tile and Marble Company re-laid the tiles in a laborious undertaking. On April 15, 2010 the mural was unveiled by city officials. A huge celebratory crowd was in attendance. It was entertained by colorful dancers from Saltillo, Mexico. The city is rightly proud to exhibit this wonderful artwork of Hispanic history.