



**JOEL GARCIA**  
Master Papier-Mache Artist

By Amanda Parsons

The brightly colored, fancifully imaginative papier-mache art of Mexico City brings out the child in us all. In spite of ourselves, smiles light up our faces as we ogle the laughing skeletons (who teach that in the end our lives on earth are just ephemeral journeys) or the “alebrijes” (the dragon-like creatures of our nightmares who are not nearly so frightening in daylight and painted in acrylic).

I had the great privilege of accompanying master papier-mache artist Joel Garcia on a visit to the children of Los Angeles’ Wonderland Avenue Elementary School. Taking a day’s break from Rocky Behr’s Folk Tree, where he had been demonstrating and taking sales orders the month of March, Joel was as much a hero to the 600 (!) excited kids as any Hollywood star.

All the children had seen the exhibit “En Calavera: The Papier-Mache Art of the Linares Family” at UCLA’s Fowler Museum of Cultural History. Some of Joel’s pieces are displayed there, many without a signature since only recently has individual artistry been recognized in the popular arts of Mexico.

Joel has also exhibited and demonstrated his work in Philadelphia and New York. In August, he will be in San Diego and back at The Folk Tree.

From the age of eleven, Joel lived and apprenticed with his brother-in-law, Miguel Linares. He studied under Linares family scion, Pedro Linares, whose innovations elevated papier-mache from a street craft to an internationally valued art form.

Joel’s creations are a revelation. He has refined his technique until his pieces have the luster and detail of fine porcelain, but maintain a whimsy and character all their own. While respecting the

traditional, he is creating new art forms; a horned chair with a devil-calavera (skeleton) perched on the throne, experiments with combinations of animal and mythical characters and caricatures.

His hands never stop. Every piece, he says is a new vision for him. For the children, watching him at work and questioning him about his life was a brush with creative genius. Yet he is warm, generous and encouraging.

He freely gave the six to eleven year olds all the secrets of his craft. They would put him out of a job, he teased, if they kept working at it.

He showed the eager pupils how to shape creatures with hardware store wire, how to form and use plaster molds for some skulls, how to give depth to the creations with newspaper and masking tape. He gave a recipe for the required paste by boiling flour and water. He kneaded the gooey concoction into small torn pieces of brown paper to smooth out the form of the papier-mache. He stressed the importance of letting pieces dry thoroughly at each step before moving to the next. He gently reinforced a dragon wing to give it strength. And he showed with his smiles, the satisfaction he takes in his works – and theirs.

“Do you know,” the children asked, “what you are going to make when you start?” “No,” he replied, “each piece comes from my hands as I am making it.”

“How long does it take you to make a piece?” they wondered. “At least a week,” he said, “but because I have to count on drying time for paste and paint, I usually work on three or four pieces at a time.”

“Do you ever make pieces with others, like an assembly line?” “Never,” he answered, “except that my wife sometimes paints in the foundation colors.”

“Does it make you sad when a Judas figure you make for Easter Saturday celebrations are blown up and disappear?” they queried. “No,” he answered, “those are my favorites to make because so many people see them and participate in the ceremonies in the streets. A thousand people, or more, are there. It is how I started out – making these figures when I was a child. Then I went to live with the Linares’ in 1967 and learned to make pieces to keep and sell.”

“Do you have children who are learning the art of papier mache?” they asked. “Of my five children, only the ten year old boy shows any interest,” he answered.

On the way home, the artist became a tourist as we stopped in Hollywood at the Mann’s Chinese Theater. There artists of a different kind had placed their hands in cement and signed their names on the sidewalk. Symbols of theatrical accomplishments, these tableaux recognize some productions as ephemeral as the exploded Judas figures of Easter week, but as fondly remembered.

“Where,” Joel wanted to know, “is Pedro Enfante?” We couldn’t find his mark. Perhaps his memory will emerge in another form – from the hands of an extraordinary papier mache artist who signs his work with a simple “Joel.”

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## BIOGRAPHY

Papier mache artist **JOEL GARCIA** was born in San Felipe del Progreso in the State of Mexico in June, 1956. He currently lives in Mexico City. When he was eleven, he became an apprentice at the Mexico City studio of Pedro Linares. Linares is credited with elevating papier mache to the art form it is recognized to be today, and for making it renowned worldwide. Garcia incorporates all that he learned at the Linares studio into his own mythical and whimsical pieces. He is most well known for his skeletons (*calaveras*) connected with the Mexican holiday **The Day of the Dead**. These figures are often based on the prints of Jose Guadalupe Posada. Garcia's other favorite subjects are his *alebrijes* (creatures derived from his own imagination and the realm of dreams). His figures are skillfully painted in detailed patterns of vibrant color.

Garcia has exhibited and demonstrated his work in Philadelphia, Boston, New York, New Hampshire, San Francisco and Pasadena, CA.