

Sarah K. Jorgensen Remembering John Spencer and La Casona

I first met John Spencer when he joined my Spanish language class on a trip to Teotihuacán and La Plaza de Tres Culturas. On the bus, I saw how others esteemed him. The head of the program made sure that John, who donned a seersucker suit and a dapper summer hat, was comfortable as we drove from site to site. The trip featured lectures on many complexities of Mexican archeology, history and politics. Yet John, who was already well-versed in those topics, was far more interested in the physical contours of each site. He waxed poetic on the power of sculpture, the play of light, the architectural details and the effect of the open plaza space. He marveled at the steps of the Pyramid of the Sun and made a Herculean effort to climb it.

When I revealed to him that I worked for an auction house, he became excited and invited me to see his artwork the next day. We met at a coffee shop where a few of his metal sculptures (including an Iron Butterfly), religious sculptures and drawings were on display. The customers at the coffee shop, who were engaged in a lively political discussion, paused as we entered, and greeted John with reverence. John pulled out a sketchbook he had filled with drawings and leaves he had collected while visiting Albright Knox, a famous modern art gallery in upstate NY. He told me he was not able to find any actual buffalo in Buffalo, so he created his own, transforming the leaves into beautiful images of buffalo—lounging, grazing and running. It was that remarkable sense of fancy, and subtle, self-aware wit that I found most endearing.

Later on, he showed me his "wall." The wall bordered a shaded, tree church. I was amazed at the whimsical, art nouveau loops with which he gracefully surrounded the churchyard.

He then invited me for tea in his beloved "Casona." It was there that I really got to know this artist, with his woeful, sometimes flirtatious, gazes and English mannerisms. He was the epitome of a sophisticate, an aesthete. His sense of aesthetics fit uniquely into the Mexican fabric, and still does.

Since his wife passed away, John had been consumed with the refurbishing and renovation of the Casona, which I believe was once a nunnery. John showed me various tiles that he had discovered and refurbished. One, for example, was a beautiful tile mosaic of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

A large courtyard was filled with rubble. He revealed his plans to work on each area, to create a museum space. I began to see his vision for the building and the art that would be housed within.

The paned French windows opened to the Hidalgo Cathedral across the street. The rich, red tile floors and exposed stone columns contrasted with soft white and tan arched walls. Occasionally, from room to room, an object would be carefully placed for scale, texture and rhythm: a chair, a large seashell, a book. John had a true appreciation for the intimate experiences that

come to life in elegant spaces.

John was transforming the Casona into a modernist masterpiece, as well as a testament to the beauty of Spanish colonial architecture within a unique Mexican environment. His grasp of the principles of phenomenology, the study of how one learns and creates meaning from physical experiences, informed this work. I remember books piled by the door, including "The Poetics of Space" by Gaston Bachelard (a classic French text on phenomenology) and "Under the Volcano" by Malcolm Lowry. I only wish I knew then what I know now. (Three years after meeting John, I left the auction business and enrolled in a graduate program in museum studies and the anthropology of art.)

The house deeply affected and inspired me. I asked if I could come back and paint. I spent a couple of afternoons drawing the entrance, the great courtyard, and John stopped by occasionally to give me pointers on perspective. Every nook in the Casona is beautiful and fit to be appreciated by artists and visitors alike. I felt a great sense of honor and privilege to be able to enter John's awe-inspiring world.

John Spencer's art, his life and his beloved Casona are all part of Mexican twentieth century history. He was able to bridge the ancient and modern seamlessly in his own imagination. John is one of a few important Europeans who made a lasting impact on Mexican intellectual and artistic culture. His focus on certain aspects of visual art and physical space echoes the work of Tina Modotti, Moran, even Russian Filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (who had a very strong artistic and intellectual relationship with Siqueiros while the latter was exiled in Taxco). John's poetic and artistic visions are both by Mexican artists as well as expatriate Mexicans, who are able to capture the unique poetics of the nation. For example, in Lords Portillo's recent documentary "El Diablo Nunca Duerme," she explores the ruins of an old colonial town in intimate detail—a textured pink wall here, a lone rose growing from a flower pot there, a long shadow on a winding street, a slightly weathered sign over a cantina, the wheels of a chalapas stand. These are things that can be seen all over Mexico, but it takes a true visionary to appreciate them.

John Spencer was a slightly frail gentleman. He took every step and uttered every phrase with careful consideration. That kind of consideration is reflected in his masterpiece, the Casona, a unique Mexican treasure.

"I do think one can do more than one realizes."

John Spencer, looking at the temple of the Sun at Teotihuacan, the first day I met him.