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## Photographer's depictions of Mexico no longer anonymous

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By **Elda Silva** - Express-News

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When Mexican art historian Luis-Martin Lozano was working on his first book about Frida Kahlo, he selected pictures from the Kahlo family collection for the biography, including images of the artist by an unknown photographer.

"They didn't know who they were from, and the photos were not signed, so I chose three of them and they appeared in the book as anonymous," Lozano says.

After the book was published in 2001, he received a letter from a woman in Italy. The photographs were by her late father, Alejandra Matiz wrote. A renowned Colombian photographer who worked for publications such as Look and Life, Leo Matiz spent about seven years in Mexico during the 1940s. During that time, he gained entry to the upper echelons of Mexico's art world.

Ultimately, however, Matiz fled Mexico in the wake of a very public falling out with muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros and was, more or less, forgotten there.

"Eventually when (Alejandra Matiz) came to Mexico, she told me she wanted me to have a look at the negatives about Mexico," Lozano says. "I was amazed at the quality of these photos."

That's when Lozano began doing research for his latest book, "The Mexico of Leo Matiz," recently published in Mexico. An exhibit of the photographer's work by the same title is currently on display at the Instituto de México as part of Fotoseptiembre USA, the annual photography festival.

The exhibit includes photographs of luminaries such as a staunch-looking Kahlo and a dewy, pre-fame María Félix along with images of anonymous industrial and agrarian workers. The figures in Matiz's images are shot at a cross angle, frequently with wide expanses of sky as a backdrop.

"Leo Matiz is an artist who's going to be influenced by Mexican muralism, so in his aesthetics as a photographer, there is a tendency to the monumental; there is a tendency to the epic; to the drama," Lozano says.

In a portrait of Kahlo included in the show, the artist stands looking skyward as if fixed to the landscape. Likewise, an elderly, weatherworn peasant photographed sitting on rocks has a sculptural permanence.

"(Matiz) studied the murals. He became aware of that lesson of visual painting and he blended this with the technique of the photographer, with the use of black and white, with the impeccable light that Mexico has," Lozano says. "He never made photos like this in other places where he traveled."

Matiz began his career in magazines as a caricaturist. He took up photography in the late 1930s, after he received a camera as a gift. But "he wanted to be a painter," Lozano says.

In 1941, he came to Mexico with his friend, sculptor Julio Abril, partly drawn by Mexico City's art scene, then ruled by the muralists. He worked for a number of magazines, producing photo essays. In his work, Matiz bridged the gap between photojournalism and art photography, Lozano says.

"In very few years, he positions himself as highly respected, and respected among filmmakers like Gabriel Figueroa and Emilio 'El Indio' Fernández and the major photographers of Mexico, like Manuel Alvarez Bravo," Lozano says.

Because of Matiz's interest in painting, he also became acquainted with Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and "unfortunately for him, with David Alfaro Siqueiros," Lozano says.

Matiz and Siqueiros collaborated on a series of photographs. In 1947, Siqueiros had an exhibit at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in which "he presented several paintings totally inspired on the photos of Leo Matiz," Lozano says. Whether Siqueiros credited Matiz is the subject of some debate. Regardless, a disagreement erupted between the muralist and the photographer, and Matiz publicly accused Siqueiros of plagiarism.

"Mexico was a very nationalistic country — even more so back then — so when Matiz came out accusing Siqueiros of *plagio*, it became a major scandal, and, of course, intellectuals and art critics defended Siqueiros. (Matiz's) studio was set on fire ... and he left Mexico because he feared for his own life," Lozano says.

Matiz, who died in 1998, was effectively banned from Mexico's art photography history for the next 50 years, he adds. But there is a rediscovery under way.

Also among the photographs in the show, Lozano made it a point to include one of Siqueiros on the floor of his studio.

"I selected this one because it's Siqueiros on his knees at a Leo Matiz exhibition," he says.

"The Mexico of Leo Matiz" is at the Instituto Cultural de México, 600 HemisFair Park, through Oct. 25. Call (210) 227-0123. Go to [www.saculturamexico.org](http://www.saculturamexico.org).



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The subjects of Leo Matiz's photos frequently are shown with a wide expanse of sky behind them.

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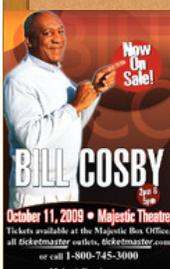
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