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National Museum of Mexican Art

The National Museum of Mexican Art (NMMA) is located just west of Chinatown in the Pilsen neighborhood. Pilsen is a historically Latino neighborhood, and it was a port of entry for many Mexican immigrants due to liberal immigration laws in the 1950s and 1960s. Pilsen is known for its working class people, strong sense of community, and roots in community activism. It is without a doubt that the NMMA was established and shaped in a community with a strong sense of Latino identity. Pilsen has struggled with many problems including, poverty, drug abuse, and gang violence, despite these issues, the NMMA provides a positive reflection of the community and forms a strong basis for cultural literacy. My visit to the museum assisted me in understanding how a museum operates and various ways they can help preserve the cultural heritage of a community.

The museum was founded in 1982 by a group of Chicago Public School teachers with a starting budget of 900 dollars. Carlos Tortoledo organized the group with the goal of starting an institution that focused in art, accessibility, education, and social justice. The museum changed its name from Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in 2006 to its current name. This was the start of its growing presence in the Pilsen community, but the museum remained focused with their mission to showcase Mexican culture, preserve Mexican art, encourage professional development of Mexican artists, and offer art education programs. This mission has brought them to receive an accreditation by the American Alliance of Museums in 1997, which champion the efforts NMMA has done to bring art, culture, and history to anyone that walks through their doors. Currently the Museum is the largest in the country to house Mexican art collections. Most impressively, it has been able to sustain a high level of recognition due to the hard work of their board of trustees and staff.

The NMMA sits in Harrison Park and stands out with a decorative, bold, brick pattern that stretches around the building. The building is 48,000 square feet with over 100,000 visitors and counting. The NMMA is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10 am to 5pm. The museum has 4 gallery rooms and a large hall with a stage where they host workshops, parties (like their annual Sor Juana Festival and Queer prom), artist visits, and meetings. Patrons who enter the building are greeted by staff that are eager to answer questions about the museum. There is

also a gift shop that one might confuse with being part of the museum because of the beautiful souvenirs and works of art they have for sale.

During my visit, people from all walks of life entered the building. Students from elementary schools, families, seniors, and people from other neighborhoods exploring Pilsen were stopping in the museum. I noticed many adults taking notes as they admired the art and read the abstracts in the galleries. This reminded me of previous times in undergrad when I was asked to write about reports on Latino artists.

One important aspect about the museum was that it did not require an admission fee to enter. The museum has been free of charge since 1987 and is one of the many respectable qualities it is proud to proclaim. This is significant because it allows everybody to visit regardless of financial means and offers exposure to the culture and heritage that shapes a large ethnic identity. It is also great for librarians because it offers an opportunity for collaborative programming, such as field trips, and builds a great partnership between libraries and museums.

While I was visiting, I was able to speak to Barbara G. Engelskirchen, the Chief Development Officer of the NMMA. She is in charge of managing development and administration of a variety of grant and donation programs with the museum. We discussed the major funders for the museum which are Chicago Park Districts, Chicago Community Trust, corporations like Target, Exelon Foundation, and Southwest. It was nice to see the recognition plaques hanging in a hallway with names of benefactors, patrons, and guarantors thanking them for helping the museum continue to serve the community. She stated the Museum is avid in using social media to promote their exhibitions and events happening in the museum (Engelskirchen, 2016). I visited their Facebook page and noticed they update its content constantly. The comments and reviews of the museum only confirm the statements she made about the staff doing a great job promoting the museum with hashtags and posts. Another interesting fact I learned while speaking to her was that the NMMA is working on an online database for their permanent collection. This is a great example of incorporating technology to assist users in navigating their collection and finding what they are looking for faster.

The museum's collection incorporates a vast array of paintings, drawings, sculptures, Pre-Cuatemoc artifacts, and textiles to name a few. Their collections have traveled internationally to Oaxaca, Mexico and Madrid, Spain. They have an outgoing loan that has been developed with policies and procedures to ensure the collections are maintained and kept intact. The collection that stood out the most to me was their textiles, with over 500 pieces from various regions in

Mexico and new additions formerly owned by one of my favorite authors, Sandra Cisneros.

The NMMA mission of bringing art and education to everyone continues to hold true. Their collections have traveled to multiple public schools and universities throughout Illinois as part of their educational outreach efforts. Their website states over 130,000 visitors have attended their educational programs, including 58,000 students. The museum offers children and family classes weekends, after-school, and during the summer. The classes incorporate the themes of their current exhibitions as well as history and art. There are classes that focus on teaching art techniques and media to children from ages 7 to 12. Special exhibition workshops are offered to adults by artists and educators that also align with exhibition themes and art forms.

The Yollocalli Arts Reach is a program for teens and young adults that teaches them important life skills with career-training. The program helps youth learn about photography, videography, mapping, drawing, media, journalism and music production. The NMMA also has a partnership with After School Matters, an organization that pays teens to become apprentices in various programs depending on their interests. The session that stood out to me the most is the Camera Flux. This After School Matters program teaches teens to become documentarians. The teens learn skills in photo and video editing as well as work with local artist that have worked with VICE and MTV. The NMMA is a great example of institutions focusing on youth and encouraging them to explore their interest as they learn important culture and history.

The museum also promotes a safe space to teens to be themselves by highlighting the connection between art, Mexican culture, and sexual diversity. have the opportunity to attend Queer Prom, a queer alternative to traditional high school proms. The youth are able to celebrate this rite of passage with other LGBT people to embrace who they are. Queer Prom is held annually at the NMMA, during which teens enjoy music, dancing, food and browse LGBT information booths. This year the prom was hosted on May 20, 2016 and the theme was "Fearlessly and Unapologetic." Teens attend this prom from all over Chicago and neighboring suburbs. The journey is not in vain as for many teens, this could be the only safe space to celebrate their prom.

The museum also offers educators professional development in the field of language arts, social science, Spanish, and early childhood. The website states the goal is to "integrate culturally relevant content and innovate hands-on strategies in the curriculum" (NMMA, 2016). The curriculum follows the Illinois and National Learning standards. There is a group fee that starting at \$500 per session depending on the program. This is a great resource for schools that have a large

population of Latino students or that want to incorporate history from other parts of the world. Personally, I would have enjoyed learning more about indigenous Mexican history in school because I find it to be an integral part of my identity.

My visit to The NMMA has allowed me to not only enjoy their current exhibitions but also restore my sense of Mexican identity. The museum serves the community by following its mission since 1982 and has stayed relevant through their journey and expansion. The museum is not going away any time soon, as it continues to grow in collection and recognition. The NMMA serves to empower its Latino community and bring education as a form of cultural literacy to everyone that comes through their doors.

Works Cited

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