

# The Studio

## OF GLADYS ROLDAN-DE-MORAS

By Clover Cameron



**M**agic can occur anywhere. Take, for instance, a busy street in San Antonio, Texas, with five lanes of traffic rushing past a bustling neighborhood of restaurants, doctors' offices, and an upscale grocery store—where the businesses give way to residential blocks with a sleek, white, modern house that sits behind a cinderblock wall. Unlike the surrounding houses, this one doesn't sit neatly parallel to the street; it's at a noticeable slant, facing squarely north.

To step through the gates and into the foyer is to step into another world. The rear wall, composed of 15 five-by-seven-foot windowpanes, stretches up, embracing the Texas sun and bathing everything in the room in cool light. The space you find yourself in might contain, at any given time, larger-than-life murals in progress, models posing in glittering China Poblana costumes, and a wise and experienced mentor tog-

gling fluently between English and Spanish as she instructs her protégés at their easels. Sometimes you'll find even more improbable things: the corner of a building—and only the corner—on wheels, a staircase to nowhere on wheels, and an engineering professor composing music at a grand piano.

You have entered Taller Luz de Angeles (Studio Light of Angels), the studio of accomplished Western impressionist oil painter Gladys Roldan-de-Moras, but you could be forgiven for mistaking it for a portal into an alternate and much more interesting universe. "I built this studio painting by painting," Roldan-de-Moras says of the four-year-old building. "It's been a labor of love."

The studio, just a five-minute drive from the home Roldan-de-Moras shares with her husband Rafael, represents the fulfillment of a longtime dream. It's the first time in Roldan-de-Moras' long ar-

tistic career that she's had a space large enough to hold her oversized canvases, her cherished bilingual library, her collection of costumes





and props, her tools and supplies, the occasional workshop, and the sheer bigness of her personality and artistic vision.

“I started with my studio in a breakfast nook in our house,” Roldan-de-Moras says. “I had to move all the breakfast things around to accommodate myself. That’s when I was basically on my way to finding my voice, learning my craft—not to say that I know my craft. This is a lifelong journey. The more I paint, the more I need to learn.”

The breakfast-nook studio served its purpose until the family—Gladys, Rafael, and their three now-grown children—moved to another home, where Roldan-de-Moras constructed a backyard studio. “It was sort of a cabin structure,” she says. “It had only electricity, no water, no nothing. I had to build it economically, because I was still, little by little, becoming successful at finding homes for my paintings. I built it facing north; having that north light was a big deal. I did learn that I really needed a bathroom with a sink, though. I was always having to run back to the house to wash my things.”

When she and Rafael moved yet again, purchasing an empty lot in San Antonio where they could build a house from the ground up, Roldan-de-Moras intended to build a studio on the same lot but the homeowners’ association had other ideas. “We extended the house’s foundation quite a bit when we built so that it could also serve as a foundation for a future studio. I was not aware I would find a big stop to this from my HOA.”

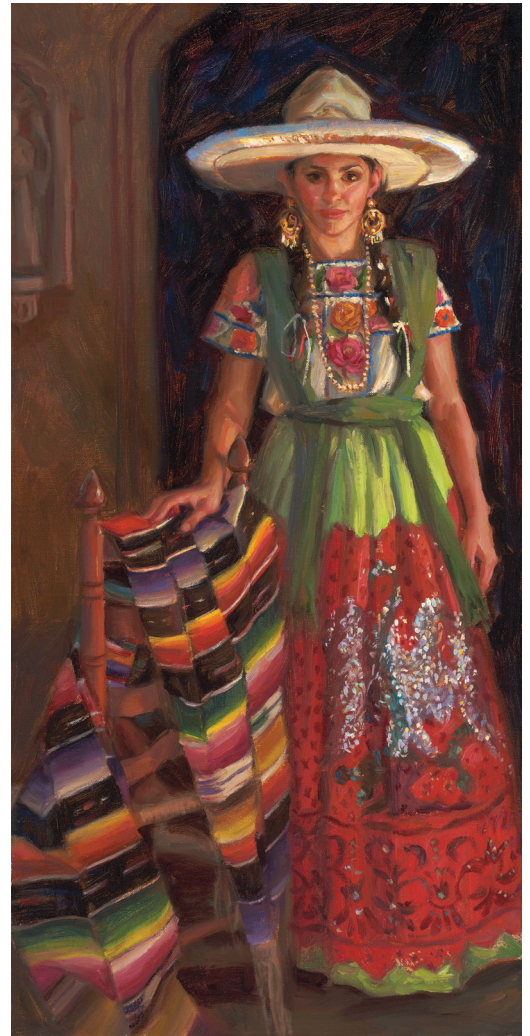
Fortunately, the new house featured a bonus room with north-lit windows, and that space served as her studio for a time. Roldan-de-Moras made do, adding north-facing skylights for additional light. “But I just couldn’t paint only looking at the blue window,” she says, referring to the blue sky above her. “I began looking for a lot where I could build a studio. I was very lucky that, within less than five minutes’ drive, we found this half-acre lot, and I was able to put all my savings from my art into buying the lot.”







*Chinas Poblanas, oil, 48" by 36"*



*China Poblana, oil, 12" by 24"*

But construction delays plagued the project. Roldan-de-Moras also discovered, soon after purchasing the lot, that the adjacent two-lane road would soon widen to five lanes to accommodate the rapid growth of the area and the arrival of new businesses. "I built a cinderblock wall all the way around the property," she says. "We were starting to have grandbabies, and I wanted them to be able to enjoy the front yard."

Finally, in 2019, Roldan-de-Moras was able to move in. "I'm celebrating my fourth year here," she says.

Its exterior is deceptive. "People probably think it's a California house," she says with a laugh, referring to its spare, modern look. "It's

white, with a plain brown gate."

The layout, as Roldan-de-Moras describes it, "is very big, but very simple." The floor is concrete, allowing for easy movement of the many items she has on rollers. Some of those items, such as counters and easels, are fairly standard; other items are more unusual.

"I have a corner of a house on rollers—just a corner," she says. "I can move it around to create shadows on any of my models or mannequins, or for still lifes. It regularly changes colors—I'll go to Home Depot to buy a new color. It's changed three or four times."

***"I built this studio painting by painting."***

Roldan-de-Moras also has a wheeled staircase she uses while working on a mural. Even her Hughes easels, specifically designed for large works, can't accommodate

her current project so she had to think even bigger. The piece will hang on the wall while it's in progress, and she will move her wheeled staircase

from point to point to reach the various parts of the canvas. "In my old backyard cabin studio, I put a mural on cinderblocks and worked from top to bottom," she says. "When I finished, my back told me, 'Never again,'" she says. "That's how I learned about sciatica."




In addition to the towering wall of windows, she has artificial light designed to mimic the natural north light so that she can paint at night. She also has electric blinds for the days the Texas sun gets too bright.

"I have a grand piano in the middle of my studio," Roldan-de-Moras says, acknowledging that it's an unusual item to have in a painter's studio. "I would not have been able to build this place without the love and support of my family, especially my husband. And, although he is a professor of engineering, he is also artistic. He writes music and poems and books. I lend this place not only to him, but to up-and-coming composers who need a rehearsal space."

Upstairs, there are rooms containing many supplies. "I have my paintings and frames and canvases," Roldan-de-Moras says. "I also have ethnic dresses and props for my models and mannequins. I've collected a lot of them through the years—I have closets full! I paint a lot of my heritage."

Roldan-de-Moras is particularly fond of China Poblana dresses, a traditional style of dress from her native Mexico that features vivid colors, elaborate embroidery, and hundreds of glittering sequins. "I try to capture that shine in my paintings," she says. "Oh, and I wear them, too."

Although she no longer teaches regularly, Roldan-de-Moras welcomes opportunities to mentor other artists. "I love teaching when I have the time," she says. "What's that quote? 'When one teaches, two learn.'"

Once she had moved in and established herself in her new studio, Roldan-de-Moras thought it needed a name. After asking friends for suggestions and trying out a few different candidates, she settled on Taller Luz de Angeles—Studio Light of Angels. "It's such a beautiful, beautiful light," she says. "Everybody who walks in here is like, 'Wow!' There's something very special about this place." 

---

*Clover Cameron lives in Trout Lake, Washington.*



*Encuentro, oil, 36" by 24"*



*Spirit of San Antonio, oil, 24" by 30"*