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ARTISTPROFILE / BY TERESA DUNEGAN

## Little Ambassadors with a Big Message

In every culture, dolls have a story worth telling. They speak to our hearts and to our souls. Artist, Mirta Toledo asks, "Are we listening?"

### AN ENDURING TOKEN

All around the world, it's magical when holidays or special occasions arrive and children, with wide-eyed excitement, open their gifts. Squeals of delight, hearty laughter and aromas from elaborate meals all build special memories. Although each culture has its own unique celebrations, one gift common to all cultures is the doll, and for many tykes, their dolls will teach a lifetime of lessons. As endearing childhood friends, dolls comfort our wounded feelings and make us feel secure. When used for ceremonial purposes, they fortify our souls and give us hope. As silent ambassadors, they preserve and pass on culture to future generations.

Argentinean-born artist, Mirta Toledo, fondly remembers the occasions when she received her childhood dolls, Pupe, Pierangeli, Laurita and Dominga. Little did she know then that her cherished dolls would be the start of a collection that would inspire her painting for more than a decade.

Toledo's parents, Toribio and Eva, struggled to raise three little girls in a one-room house, and poverty wasn't their only challenge. Her parents stood out ethnically. "My mother is from Spain, Toledo says. "She was very white with blonde hair and beautiful green eyes and very, very pretty. My dad was a native Guaraní Indian." Many of the indigenous Guaraní had left the jungle to find work in Buenos Aires. Toledo remembers hearing people call her father a Caresita Negra. "That's what they called the Indians—Black Heads," she says. She also recalls many occasions when people would comment on her mother's beauty and on the obvious differences between the couple. "I think it was very hard to get married because of the differences," says Toledo, "but they never transferred that negativity to us." Rather than succumb to the cycle of ethnically-charged hatred, her parents focused on the love within their marriage. Toledo recalls that her father "somehow managed to give my mother gardenias every week." The fragrant blossom became an enduring, intimate token. "I really believe in love," claims Toledo, "and I know that it could be for life because I saw it in my parents, not in a movie." Those were powerful lessons in diversity and humanity.

### SIMPLE ANSWERS

Toledo carried her childhood lessons and positive approach into adulthood. In Buenos Aires she attended the Belgrano School of Fine Arts, earning a B.E.A. in 1973, then the Prilidiano Pueyrredón



PHOTO BY RICARDO ACEVEDO



University of Fine Arts, where she earned an M.F.A. in painting in 1977 and in sculpture in 1983. It was 11 years of demanding curriculum, which she mastered with the encouragement of her parents. The Latina artist credits her father for instilling her solid values and fertile imagination. Toledo has used her creative talents to paint, sculpt and write. An accomplished author, her short stories have been published in Argentina, Spain, Canada and the United States.