

# A Retirement Steeped in Art in San Miguel de Allende

By Sharon McDonnell

When Mayer Shacter and his wife, Susan Page, now both 77, moved to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico from Berkeley, California back in 2003, they opened an art gallery. For those familiar with San Miguel, an internationally renowned art colony, this might sound like bringing coal to Newcastle or shipping ice to the Arctic. [Galería Atotonilco](#), however, is not just any art gallery.

Ranked No. 1 among things to do in San Miguel on TripAdvisor, and described by the editor of *Artes de Mexico* magazine as hosting the “finest exhibition and sale of Mexican popular arts in all of Mexico,” the gallery sells a jaw-dropping variety of folk art from across the country.

Mayer and Susan launched the gallery believing they had spotted an unfilled niche in the city, which is a popular destination among tourists and expats from North America.

“There was no substantial folk art gallery in San Miguel at all. In fact, there are fairly few in all of Mexico,” explains Susan. “There are some regional ones, but many of those are more like ‘stores,’ with shelves crowded with items; not beautifully presented, and not at all selective. There’s a huge difference between genuine folk art—which has roots in pre-Hispanic traditions and requires high levels of skill—and tourist souvenirs that look like folk art.”

Galería Atotonilco sells everything from ceramics and masks to sculptures and vintage textiles. Every piece is hand-selected by Mayer, who spent 27 years as a professional ceramicist before opening a mid-century furnishings store in Oakland.

“The excitement of buying, restoring, and selling period furniture took over in 1988, and I never returned to my potter’s wheel,” says Mayer, whose ceramic works are in collections owned by the city of San Francisco and the Oakland Museum of California.

“Today, it’s my passion to help keep alive one of the richest traditions of indigenous art anywhere on the planet.”

The couple’s decision to open the gallery was inspired by their long-standing connections to Mexico and its artistic culture. The pair have been supporters of the Huichol Center for Cultural Survival and Traditional Arts since meeting its director, University of California, Los Angeles anthropologist Susana Valadez, in 1981. Susana’s teenage relatives even lived with the couple in Berkeley so they could attend high school in the U.S.

Mayer and Susan built the gallery on an abandoned property in a small town five miles north of San Miguel, called Atotonilco. The 8-acre site next to a river featured two abandoned warehouses that had been a furniture factory. After purchasing the property, they began a 22-month renovation to convert the two buildings into a gallery and an adjacent home, moving in when the work was completed in 2003. In the years since, the gallery has expanded tenfold in size from 600 to 6,000 square feet.

Over the years, the couple have traveled throughout Mexico in the pursuit of undiscovered artists, visiting dozens of small villages, art studios in cities like Oaxaca and San Cristóbal de las Casas, estate sales, bazaars, and antique stores.

When asked about the treasures in their gallery, the septuagenarians light up with a youthful energy. Among their most-loved items are lacquered gourds, called the “Fabergé eggs of Mexico” due to their intricate flower, bird, and geometric designs. The pieces are from an indigenous village in the state of Guerrero, four hours from a highway. The most exquisite gourds—painted with mineral powders made from natural materials and polished with chia oil until shiny—are displayed in an annual competition in the village. Mayer is usually the primary buyer.

Another favorite are whimsical animal and Day of the Dead figures made from papier-mâché by artist Felipe Linares, using a craft named *alebrije* invented by his grandfather. “Wood carvers in Oaxaca also make them, but the papier-mâché ones are much more elaborate,” notes Susan.

The gallery also displays yarn paintings by members of the Huichol indigenous people in Jalisco and Nayarit states, one of the most intact aboriginal cultures in the Western Hemisphere.

Susan accompanies Mayer on all buying trips and does promotion and writing for the gallery, in addition to helping customers. Working in the gallery is a mere side-hustle, however, from her own retirement gig, serving as executive director of the San Miguel Writers’ Conference.

Susan, former director of the University of California, Berkeley Women’s Clinic and author of five books about relationships, founded the conference in 2004 after spotting another untapped niche. Though celebrated for its visual arts, the city lacked a forum for its writing scene—an oversight she has since resolved.

To date, such acclaimed authors as Gloria Steinem, Alice Walker, Scott Turow, and Margaret Atwood have been keynote speakers at the multiday event, which takes place in February. “Building it into one of the most widely respected conferences in the world has been richly satisfying,” says Susan.

Retire soon? Not these two active participants in the cultural scene of one of Mexico’s artiest cities. “Why would I retire when I am doing what I most love every day, doing things and meeting people that make our lives an exciting adventure?” asks Mayer. Susan adds, “We follow the advice of the comedian George Burns: ‘You can’t help yourself from growing older, but you can help yourself from getting old!’”