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**Carlos Lopez:
A Forgotten Michigan Painter**

*by George Vargas, Ph.D.
Austin, Texas*

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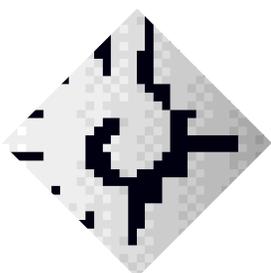
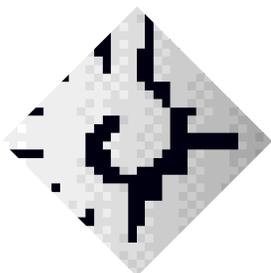
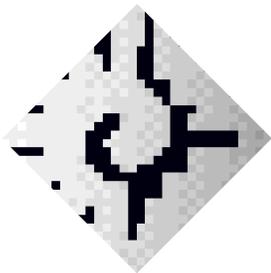
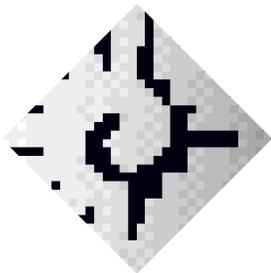
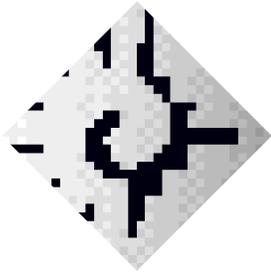
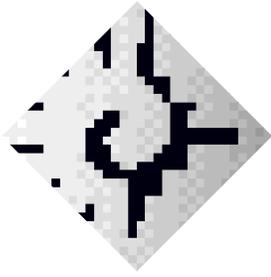


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About the Author: *George Vargas*

Born in Texas, and raised in Michigan, he attended the University of Michigan, where he received his BFA, MA, and Ph.D. An art historian and Americanist, museum educator, and arts administrator, his recent publications focus on American mural art, Border Studies, and Mexican American art. He is currently living in Austin, Texas, where he is finishing a book on contemporary Mexican American art.

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Carlos Lopez: A Forgotten Michigan Painter

Introduction

Sketchy historical records show the existence of a handful of Latino artists in the United States at the turn of the century. During the 1920's, 30's, and 40's, times of national prosperity and growth as well as economic depression, Latino artists increased across the country, including Michigan and the Midwest in general. Limited records show artists of Latino or Latin American origins producing visual expressions diverse in style and theme, representing folk art to mainstream influences. These artists reflected and portrayed their immediate environment as well as the broader American society. Their openness to multiple influences has continued to allow Latinos to respond to trends in American art in a unique way, further enriching the concept of artistic and cultural diversity in Latino art.

In the modern period, some Latino artists participated in the federal mural painting projects in the United States. These public art projects were directly influenced by the Mexican mural movement of the 1920's and 30's, both ideologically and aesthetically. In Michigan, despite general interest in Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry* fresco cycle (1932-1933) at the Detroit Institute of Arts, Latino art generally speaking, featured less social commentary and more individual expression that encompassed a panorama of styles and aesthetics. Many Latino artists did not refer to elements of their own culture in their work, but instead leaned toward mainstream art in search of personal meaning.

Among mainstream artists working in Michigan, Cuban-born Carlos Lopez (1908 - 1953) was one of the most recognized modern painters in the United States. During his lifetime, he received many prestigious awards and commissions. An academically trained landscape and portrait painter, Lopez serves as a vital historical link connecting American modern art in Michigan with a new Latino history of the state. As one of only several Michigan artists, Latino or otherwise, who received federal mural commissions, Lopez also made important contributions to the development of American mural art through his historical murals in Michigan and Illinois. The work of Lopez offers insight into the cultural history of the Latino presence in Michigan, as well as giving us a unique view of popular culture in the United States.

For 20 years Lopez played an influential role in the artistic life of Ann Arbor and Detroit as a hardworking art teacher, productive artist, and dedicated American, but today he still remains for the general public a shadowy figure in Michigan history.

Carlos Lopez

One of the most famous and prolific Latino artists of the 1940's, Carlos Lopez was born in Havana, Cuba in 1908 to Spanish parents. He spent his early years in Spain, emigrating to the United States with his parents when he was 11, where he received an American art education. A versatile of exceptional quality, Lopez painted his beloved Michigan and adopted country in modern terms, representing the new spirit of American art of the times through his artworks and teaching.

Lopez first studied with George Rich at the Detroit Art Academy and later with Charles St. Pierre at the Chicago Art Institute. He also studied under Leon Makielski, landscape and portrait painter, and University of Michigan art teacher. Lopez exhibited for the first time in Detroit in January 1932; soon after he served as director of the Detroit Art Academy from 1933 to 1937 and later as a teacher at the Meininger School of Art in Detroit from 1937 to 1942. Following a brief tenure as an instructor at the Summer School of Painting in Saugatuck, Mich., in 1944, Lopez finally became a professor of art at the University of Michigan in 1945, living in Ann Arbor until his death in 1953.¹

A master of oils and watercolors, he often competed in the Michigan Artists Exhibition and won a number of major awards, including the Scarab Club Gold Medal in 1938 for his painting, *Boy with Bow*, a study of a serious and pensive youth drawing back the string on his wooden bow. He entered *Boy with Bow* in Springfield, Ill., at the Old Northwest Territory Art Exhibition and was awarded a cash prize. In 1936, he was a prize winner in the Michigan Artists Exhibition for his entry, *Boy on a Horse*, which depicts a small farm boy riding on the back of a huge work horse. Lopez vested whimsy and compassion into this familiar rural subject (see Figure 1).



Figure 1 -- Carlos Lopez, *Boy on a Horse*, 1936, oil.

Source: Photo reproduced with permission of Detroit Institute of Arts.

Lopez entered many state and national shows, winning more awards and critical recognition. Local awards include the Haan Prize in 1936, the Modern Art Prize in 1937, the Scarab Gold Medal in 1938, and the Kahn Award in 1940. He was featured in Detroit area exhibitions at the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Detroit Scarab Club, and the Detroit Artists' Market during this early period in his career. He also exhibited in the Golden State Exposition in 1936 and the World's Fair in New York in 1939.²

Using a strong, formal sense of composition and both rich and low tonality of color, Lopez began painting murals in the late 1930's. Between 1937 and 1942, he won important mural competitions and was commissioned to create murals for post office buildings under the Treasury Department Public Works of Art Project. In 1937, assisted by his wife, Rhoda, he painted a fresco mural titled *The Stage of Dawn* in the post office in Dwight, Ill., which documented the role of the stage coach in frontier transportation and mail delivery (a popular theme for post office murals tailored for the post office construction boom of the 1930's). Armed frontiersmen assist the stagecoach driver as he harnesses the frisky horses to the coach in the early morning light.³

In 1938 Lopez painted *Plymouth Trail* in the post office in Plymouth, Mich., which was built by the Works Progress Administration three years earlier. Upon entering the building, the viewer is immediately greeted by a colorful historical scene, again praising the crucial role of the stage coach in transportation and mail delivery in Michigan's history, first as part of the Northwest Territory and later as a new state (see Figure 2). The top horizontal panel

presents a simple picturesque street scene in Plymouth of the 1860's, a small town that served as a major junction of transportation and trade in western Wayne County. A stage coach is waiting for its passengers, its team of sleek horses eager to start. Several townsfolk in the lower left corner of the mural stand by reading the local newspaper, while a young barefoot country boy stands in the center wearing rolled-up pants and a straw hat with his dog intently watching the excitement that the coach's arrival has generated. Chickens and pigs roam freely in town. The background of plain wood buildings against an uncluttered landscape communicates the glorious yet hardy pioneer spirit of early America.

To help achieve an idyllic presence of early Michigan history the artist adopted an almost folk or naive painting style using the simplest of linear perspectives and almost flat human figures.

Below the main panel three predella panels further illustrate stages in early Plymouth history. In the lower left predella panel a bearded pioneer dressed in buckskin and a coonskin cap stands in a field he has cleared of trees in preparation for cultivation. Body posed in a three-fourth view with his head in profile, the pioneer spies a deer leaping in an opening in the thick woods. A group of small cabins set near the horizon represent the settlement of Plymouth. A locomotive train carrying freight, mail, and passengers travels past the farms and fields of grain in the central predella. Several town residents view the train's passing from a carriage standing in front of a large white house. The image in the right predella depicts one of Lopez's rare social commentaries, reflecting Rivera's impact on American mural art.



Figure 2 -- Carlos Lopez, *Plymouth Trail*, 1938, mural. Commissioned by Treasury Department Public Works of Art Project (T.R.A.P.) for Plymouth Post Office, Plymouth, Mich.

Source: Photo by George Vargas.

The theme of progress continues in the third predella painting with the emergence of the automobile and the industries it created in Plymouth. In contrast to the early agricultural and industrial prosperity rendered in the central panel, Lopez depicts the Depression in his portrait of a nameless, homeless family seeking shelter in a cold, dark railroad train yard. The bleak urban landscape of lonely factories and warehouses reinforces the despair and sympathy that the artist felt for America's poor and displaced people of all races. In comparison to other post office murals, this particular panel represents an unusual subject for government-sponsored art in the 1930's.

In 1940 Lopez painted another post office mural, *Bounty*, in Paw Paw, Mich.. Now using a distinct illustrative style reflective of American popular culture, the mural features the rich agricultural bounty of the prosperous Michigan farming communities of Van Buren County. In the center of the mural, apples, grapes, corn, and other important crops are organized in cornucopia fashion. To the left a seemingly content migrant farm worker cares for an apple tree, while a handsome couple hold their freshly harvested bounty in baskets and look at each other with goodwill and love. On the right side of the mural a fiddler and a harmonica player make music while others dance in a celebration of the harvest. A Michigan winter scene of ice skaters on a pond appears at the top of the mural, above the musicians, as a reminder that tourism is also a vital industry in Van Buren County, home of beautiful inland lakes, rivers, and 20 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline. This mural speaks both to the early pioneering efforts to settle and cultivate Michigan and to the modern economic wealth brought on by advanced agricultural technology. Lopez communicated a sense of plenty and well-being in a self-conscious attempt to overcome post-Depression anxiety and slow economic recovery in Michigan.⁴

Selected from 22 artists in a mural competition, Lopez received a \$1,400 government-sponsored commission in 1942 to paint a tempera mural on the east wall above a bulletin board and centrally-located door in the lobby of the recently completed post office in Birmingham, Mich.⁵ After intensive research, Lopez chose a typical pioneer scene, *The Pioneer Society's Picnic* (see Figure 3). In the mid-1800's residents in Birmingham and Oakland County gathered annually for a gala picnic; Lopez picked the picnic of 1850 for his theme, incorporating portraits

of Oakland County pioneers he had copied from early historical photographs and portraits of a few contemporary Birmingham residents who modeled for him during the execution of the mural. The details of the picnic were based on the childhood recollections of Fannie Fish, a local woman. The picnic featured roast pig and readings from Shakespeare recited by amateur thespians. She recalled, "It was hard for the elders to decide which they liked best that day, the poet or the pig!"

Among the local picnickers in the mural, Fannie Fish appears as a little girl holding a bouquet of flowers. Near her sit two women with a baby, a finely rendered composition resembling in spirit Leonardo da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne and the Infant St. John* (1498). The realistic human figures are monumental and graceful, radiating maternal love and human compassion. Elizabeth Dewey, wife of a prominent leader, holds the baby, while Mrs. Campbell, wife of the village doctor, sits by. In the center of the mural, directly above the door, Dr. Robert Le Baron points to the sky as he quotes Shakespeare. An enthusiastic youth dashes in front of Le Baron with unbridled excitement. On the right side of the mural, a tall man whose face is a composite of James Jacobes and August Baldwin, two local judges, points to the roasting pig. Two other men stand by the judge: James Craig, another Birmingham pioneer, and James Bloomberg, sheriff at the time the mural was painted. A small, but sturdy, church stands in the distance where women prepare tables with their special picnic dishes in the church yard.



Figure 3 -- Carlos Lopez, *The Pioneer Society's Picnic*, 1942, mural. Commissioned by T.R.A.P. for Birmingham Post Office, Birmingham, Michigan.
Source: Photo by George Vargas.

The Birmingham mural proved to be controversial, becoming the focus of local criticism.

Even before he started painting, Lopez was accused of being an outsider or stranger to Birmingham, unfamiliar with its local culture and history. Lopez responded immediately in a friendly letter of introduction published by the *Birmingham Eccentric* newspaper. He explained that he was currently living in Royal Oak, a community neighboring Birmingham's west border, and that he was aware of the history of their town and was familiar with it personally since he had courted his wife in her hometown of Birmingham. He also listed his credentials, assuring the residents of his professional skills and integrity.⁶

Even before completion of the mural, local critics were offended by the representations of their forefathers in the painting, saying their faces appeared "Negroid." In a newspaper article Lopez calmly refuted the charges, revealing his historical sources and directing the critics to study the photographs themselves. He also received attacks from some who claimed that the moustache he painted on Sheriff Bloomberg made him look "too much like a Chinese."⁷ The furor was intense, but short-lived. Though many demanded the mural be removed or painted over, it ultimately survived.

In 1960, the mural, old and peeling, faced destruction during renovation of the post office when plans called for new walls. Many community members organized to protect the mural, although the mural's background and the identity of the artist were uncertain. Zoltan Sepeshy, then director of Cranbrook Academy of Art and an old friend of Lopez, identified Lopez as the mural's artist and proposed its preservation.⁸ Joseph Sparks, one of many who responded to an advertisement for an artist to repair the mural, miraculously turned out to have been both apprentice to and friend of Lopez.⁹ Thanks to Sparks and Sepeshy the mural survives, though it suffers from obscene graffiti that has been scratched on to the figure of a pioneer woman in one of two predella panels (see Figure 4).

Lopez had become an active and well-known artist. While still working on the Birmingham mural in 1942, Lopez was selected to execute his largest mural ever in the Register of Deeds Building, Washington, D.C. This important mural commemorates the first Black troops ever used in a United States



Figure 4 -- Carlos Lopez, Pioneer Woman (detail), *The Pioneer Society's Picnic*, 1942, mural. Commissioned by T.R.A.P. for Birmingham Post Office, Birmingham, Michi.
Source: Photo by George Vargas.

military maneuver, recording Colonel Shaw's attack on Fort Wagner in 1863.¹⁰

That same busy year Lopez won the Haass Award in a Detroit Institute of Arts exhibition for his painting, *Snow Man*, which represents his conscious shift to a spontaneous and expressionistic style in order to better explore and visually record his feelings and ideas (see Figure 5). Father and children cluster around a nearly finished snowman in a typical Michigan winter scene in which the viewer can both see and feel the cold and powerful spirit of winter. In 1942 Lopez also painted *Lake Huron Fishermen*, burly men who tug at their nets alive with small fish, as great lake and sky merge in the horizon and as hovering sea gulls seek leftovers (see Figure 6). Also, he was one of eight American artists commissioned by the U.S. Department of War (and later by *Life Magazine* in 1943) to journey overseas with the American Army to create a pictorial record of World War II. In 1944 - 45, the Navy commissioned him to paint a series picturing amphibious training activities.



Figure 5 -- Carlos Lopez, *Snow Man*, 1942, oil.
Source: Photo reproduced with permission of Detroit Institute of Arts.

Soon after, Standard Oil Company also commissioned Lopez to create a series of paintings dealing with the African Theatre (Campaign) Operations.

In 1946 Lopez was chosen by the J.L. Hudson Company to work on the “Michigan on Canvas” project along with nine other professional artists who had lived, worked, or painted in Michigan at one time and whose work was representational and would be easily understood by the general public. Of the 10 painters, only four were living in Michigan at the time of the commission: Carlos Lopez, professor of art, University of Michigan; John De Martelly, professor of art, Michigan State College, and protege of Thomas Hart Benton; David Fredenthal, Guggenheim Fellowship recipient and World War II war artist correspondent who studied at Cranbrook; and Zoltan Sepeshy, director of Cranbrook, and active



Figure 6 -- Carlos Lopez, *Lake Huron Fishermen*, 1942, oil.
Source: Photo reproduced with permission of Detroit Institute of Arts.

member of the Detroit painting scene. The 95 paintings and drawings were selected by an advisory board made up of Michigan museum directors who worked on the selection of painters in cooperation with the Associated American Artists. “Michigan on Canvas” toured Michigan in over 40 exhibitions and was then on loan to the Henry Ford Museum until its disposition in 1956 when the works were donated and distributed to various libraries, museums, and universities throughout the state.¹¹

Of the 12 paintings Lopez exhibited in “Michigan on Canvas,” four were related to Michigan’s automobile manufacturing industry.

Blast Furnace — *Great Lakes Company* captures the tremendous power of the great blast furnaces with their towering stoves forcing air through intense fires that melt the ore. *Stamping Presses* — *Fisher Body Plant*, Pontiac, records the powerful technology of the automobile industry through the monstrous machines that tower over the diminutive auto workers who control the machines that press and shape steel sheets into automotive bodies. *Painting and Polishing Car Bodies* shows the automated application of modern pigments to automotive bodies helping to make them objects of grace and beauty. *Final Assembly Line* — *Plymouth Plant* pictures the final operation in modern automobile mass production, the assembly line, thus completing the painting cycle.

Four other paintings represented the City of Detroit and its urban environment; *Downtown Detroit* favorably portrays the city’s architectural growth since the 1920’s (see Figure 7). Skyscrapers, such as the pyramid-shaped Penobscot Building, dominate the skyline, while Christmas shoppers crowd downtown West Fort Street. *Ambassador Bridge* features the huge twin towers of the bridge rising 363 feet above the Detroit River and supporting the giant cables that hold the suspension bridge between Detroit and Windsor, Canada. The painting expresses the trade and friendship that exists between the neighboring nations. *Loading Cranes* — *Detroit River* and *Ships on the Detroit River* depict trade and commerce activities in Detroit’s shipping industry.

Lopez also painted landscapes for the “Michigan on Canvas” show, like *Skiing at Caberfare*, which pictures the snowy slopes of Northern Michigan, the ski slides and cross country trails that draw sports enthusiasts to the area. The skiers appear frozen in



Figure 7 - Carlos Lopez, *Downtown Detroit*, 1947, Gouache on paper.

Source: Used by permission of University of Michigan Museum of Art.

action against a cold, snow-filled landscape that captures the essence of Michigan's majestic winter scene.¹² In *Ann Arbor, Home of the University of Michigan* three children play on a grassy hill overlooking a valley populated by the many trees characteristic of the Michigan college town set against a cloud-swept sky (see Figure 8).

After 1946, Lopez turned inward to his own unconscious to explore the world of fantasy and symbolism, perhaps as a way to escape the trappings of a civilization that had recently suffered the ravages of World War II. His favorite subject became the Michigan winter, and he won Painting of the Year Award in a New York exhibition in 1947 for a winter landscape. Critics described his work as having an “eerie quality... winter landscapes with trees against a brooding sky.”¹³ His paintings had become more intense and poetic in feeling and form. When pressed, Lopez, who disliked labeling his work, called it “expressionistic, and possibly romantic.”¹⁴

By the early 1950's, a distinct aura of sadness, nostalgia, and tragedy made his paintings more complex and difficult to understand.

Traveling Minstrels (1951) presents three minstrels, each isolated by their separate thoughts, in a painting style that resembles German expressionist Max Beckmann (see Figure 9). The center minstrel looks at the viewer with uncertainty and self-doubt as he holds a tether leading to the foot of a hooded fal-



Figure 8 -- Carlos Lopez, *Ann Arbor, Home of the University of Michigan*, 1947, Gouache on paper.

Source: Used with permission of University of Michigan Museum of Art.

con perched on his shoulder. His female companion, who is partially nude, stands behind him searching for the answer to an unknown mystery from her own falcon, who is unhooded and untethered. The third minstrel seems forlorn as he turns his back and walks away from the other two, and perhaps us. His *Man Waiting* (1952) marks the end of Lopez's painting career.¹⁵ Three half-dressed performers stand behind the curtain of a circus tent awaiting the final act. They perform together, yet live alone in their grief. Their withdrawn feelings perhaps symbolize a premonition of Lopez's own impending death.

After two years of illness Carlos Lopez died Jan. 6, 1953 in Ann Arbor from pulmonary embolism. At 44, he was a respected artist and art teacher who made a valuable contribution to the development of art in Michigan. His work is represented in the Michigan collections of the Detroit Institute of Arts, the University of Michigan Alumnae Art Museum, and the Henry Ford Museum, as well as in private collections of Gerome Kamrowski, fellow artist and University of Michigan professor of art, and Albert Taubman, a student of Lopez, Michigan developer, art patron, and owner of Sotheby's Auction House.

He is remembered for his expressive artistic abilities, his integrity as a man, and his loving commitment to his family. His legacy lives on not only through his work, but also through the continuing work of his wife, Rhoda Le Blanc Lopez, and his son, Jon Lopez.¹⁵ Rhoda, a ceramist and medical illustrator, will always be associated with her husband.

She worked with her husband, both in researching and executing mural projects. In Birmingham, she sketched city residents whose portraits would be inserted in the post office mural. She also worked with her husband in ceramics, creating plates, pots, and bowls that her husband decorated with kings, archers, and animals such as kangaroos, fish skeletons, and 3-headed birds. Each year, between 1948 and 1952, they entered competitions as a team, "Lopez and Lopez," in Michigan Arts and Crafts exhibitions in Detroit, winning praise and awards for their collaboration. She also exhibited independently in the Regional Exhibition for Designers and Craftsmen U.S.A. (1953) and in the annual Michigan Arts and Crafts exhibitions from 1953 until 1957. Later in her career she was known for her "architectural bricks," used as a finish for fireplaces, as well as in relief murals and free-standing sculptures.



Figure 9 -- Carlos Lopez, *Traveling Minstrels*, 1951, oil.
Source: Used with permission of Detroit Institute of Arts.

Their son, Jon, born in Detroit in 1940, received his art education at Antioch College, the University of Michigan, and the University of California, Los Angeles, and studied in Europe before settling in California. His work has been exhibited in numerous juried shows, and in 1-man shows throughout California, in Italy, and in Spain. When he returned to Ann Arbor in 1960, his paintings were well-honed and representational in a style very much akin to his father's post-World War II period. Jon later left Ann Arbor to pursue a career in art and art education.¹⁶

As a teacher, Carlos Lopez was known for his loyalty and devotion to his students who looked to him with admiration and fondness.

After his death, Rhoda was immediately flooded with numerous requests from former art students asking to purchase his artwork. Fortunately for his students and friends, she arranged an exhibit and sale of his work, which included a collection of assorted drawings, some recently completed and signed, and some designs for future paintings,¹⁷ at the Forsythe Gallery, Ann Arbor.

Endnotes

1. Richardson, E.P. (1953). *Carlos Lopez: A Memorial Exhibition*. Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1-2. See also: Carlos Lopez, U of M Art Professor and Noted Painter, Dies at 44, *Ann Arbor News*, Jan. 7, 1953, p. 1.
2. Kenny, M.K. (1965). A History of Painting in Michigan, 1850 to World War II. Dissertation, Wayne State University, 175. See also: "Carlos Lopez," Michigan Artists Files, Detroit Institute for Arts Library, Detroit.
3. Marlene Park and Gerald Maikowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), p. 208.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.
5. "Post Office to Get \$1,400 Worth of Art," *Birmingham Eccentric*, Birmingham, April 3, 1941, p. 1-A.
6. "Mural Artist Reveals All," *Birmingham Eccentric*, Birmingham, Nov. 19, 1941, pp. 1-A, 2-A.
7. Kathryn Umphrey, "Lopez, Artist of Post Office Mural, Says Figures are Real People," *Birmingham Eccentric*, Birmingham, July 16, 1942, pp. 1-A, 2-A.
8. "Mystery Mural Saved From Painter's Brush," *Birmingham Eccentric*, Birmingham, Aug. 4, 1960, p. 1-A.
9. "Post Office Murals 'New Look' Comes from Painter's Ex-Protege," *Birmingham Eccentric*, Birmingham, Aug. 11, 1960, p. 2-A.
10. Richardson, p. 1.
11. *Michigan on Canvas* (Detroit, J.L. Hudson Company, 1947), p. 64.
12. Lopez' paintings listed and reproduced in *Michigan on Canvas*.
13. "Carlos Lopez," Michigan Artists Files.
14. "Carlos Lopez, U of M Art Professor and Noted Painter..." p. 1.
15. Richardson, p. 7.
16. At the time of completion of this article, it was found that Carlos and Rhoda Lopez had a second child, Carol Lopez, who today also is an artist and will be included in later studies. See "Rhoda LeBlanc Lopez," and "Jon Lopez," Michigan Artists File, Detroit Institute of Arts Library.
17. Ms. Jessie W. Forsythe, letter to Mr. Jean Paul Slusser, Director of University of Michigan Art Museum, April 20, 1953, Michigan Artists Files, U of M Art Museum.