

Pedro E. Guerrero dies at 95; fine arts photographer

His early work for architect Frank Lloyd Wright led a long career in the worlds of fine arts and glossy magazines.

By Suzanne Muchnic, Special to the Los Angeles Times

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Pedro E. Guerrero, a photographer whose early work with architect Frank Lloyd Wright sparked a long, distinguished career in the worlds of fine art and glossy magazines, died Thursday. He was 95.

Guerrero died at his home in Florence, Ariz., said his daughter Susan Guerrero. He had battled cancer for several years.

Unlike his more famous contemporary, Julius Shulman, whose photographs of Southern California's modern architecture have formed an indelible, collective image of Los Angeles' progressive mid-20th-century lifestyle, Guerrero became known for interpreting a single architect's vision. He photographed Wright and his buildings over a period of 20 years and presented 150 examples in a 1994 book, "Picturing Wright: An Album from Frank Lloyd Wright's Photographer."



Pedro E. Guerrero, right, stands with architect Frank Lloyd Wright in 1949. (Kaneji Domoto)

But Guerrero also photographed buildings by other architects, including Marcel Breuer, Eero Saarinen, Edward Durrell Stone and Philip Johnson; documented the work of sculptors Alexander Calder and Louise Nevelson; and shot interiors for periodicals such as *Vogue*, *House & Garden* and *Harper's Bazaar*.

"Pedro E. Guerrero: Photographs of Modern Life," a 2012 retrospective exhibition organized by the Julius Shulman Institute at Woodbury University and presented at the Woodbury Hollywood Gallery, emphasized the breadth of his work. Visitors encountered images of unsung buildings in small towns, a skating rink by Saarinen and a 1950 self-portrait of the photographer in his Manhattan studio as well as Wright's work.

A gregarious raconteur, Guerrero jokingly confided to a Wisconsin State Journal reporter: "I've always felt that I was a 6-foot-tall blond trapped in a little brown body." It was 2008 and he was celebrating his 91st birthday in Madison with the opening of his exhibition "Beyond Frank Lloyd Wright." Well known there for "The Wright Picture," a permanent installation of photographs at the Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center, which Wright helped design, Guerrero was enjoying a chance to expand his artistic persona.

But if he felt trapped by his association with Wright, he never said so. In dozens of interviews over the years, he expressed gratitude to the illustrious architect — his first and most prominent client — for jump-starting his career and being a great friend. And the partnership did seem to be a good fit.

In the opinion of art critic James Auer of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Guerrero's photographs of Wright's work "have a simple elegance that belies the skill that went into their making. The relationship between Wright and his Rolleiflex-bearing Boswell is sophisticated and knowing, laced with wit, enhanced by self-knowledge."

A native of Arizona, Guerrero was born in 1917 in Casa Grande and grew up in Mesa. Few opportunities were available to a young Latino with a creative streak, so he left for Los Angeles on his 20th birthday to join his brother at Art Center School (now Art Center College of Design in Pasadena). Pedro Guerrero didn't plan to study photography, but that was the only class open at the time. He enrolled and "fell in love," as he often said.

He was unaware of Wright until 1938 or '39, when he went to an exhibition and was struck by a photograph of Fallingwater, a southern Pennsylvania house designed by Wright to incorporate a waterfall in a residential experience. Upon returning to Arizona, Guerrero learned that Wright had built a winter home and school called Taliesin West in Scottsdale. The budding photographer's father, a sign painter who had done a bit of work for the architect, urged his son to contact Wright.

As Pedro Guerrero frequently recalled, he expected nothing, but drove to Scottsdale and boldly introduced himself as a photographer. To his surprise, Wright immediately took him under his wing. Guerrero had no salary, but he had a job. At 22, he became the resident photographer at Taliesin West.

Guerrero left Arizona to serve in the Army Air Forces during World War II. He lived in New Canaan, Conn., for many years after the war, but reconnected with Wright and continued to photograph his work until the architect's death in 1959.

In 1963 Guerrero began a 13-year association with Calder, the creator of free-spirited sculptures that move with the wind, constantly re-composing themselves. Images from the resulting visual chronicle appear in a book, "Calder at Home: The Joyous Environment of Alexander Calder." A 1979 magazine assignment led to a friendship with Nevelson, recorded in photographs of her life and art made over a five-year span.

Guerrero summed up his own career in an illustrated memoir, "Pedro E. Guerrero: A Photographer's Journey," telling his story along with those of extraordinary people he had known.

"I've had a very great and marvelous life," he told a Wisconsin reporter in 2007. "But I must say, I don't know where the time went."

He is survived by his wife, Dixie L. Guerrero, and three children.

Muchnic is a former arts writer for the Los Angeles Times.

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