

## Luis Jiménez

American, 1940–2006

### *Fiesta Jarabe* (Fiesta Dancers), 1991–93

Painted fiberglass, edition 2/5, 120 x 103 x 68 inches

Acquired 2011

University of Houston

Luis Jiménez was and still is considered the leading Hispanic sculptor of his generation. His father was born in Mexico, his mother in the United States. He was greatly influenced by the Mexican muralists as well as by popular American culture such as lowrider cars. He chose to work in fiberglass because it did not carry the cultural baggage of marble or bronze. Jiménez was a professor at the University of Houston who taught sculpture, public art, and life drawing every spring from 1994 until his death in 2006.

*Fiesta Jarabe* (Fiesta Dancers), located on the University of Houston campus, was purchased in 2011, but was not installed until 2013 after a thorough cleaning and some minor restoration. The sculpture is a representation of the traditional Mexican hat dance (or *Jarabe Tapatio* in Spanish). Its two figures are ten feet





















high and face each other in the stance of the dance with the hat between them.

Jiménez's work often dealt with social and political issues and explored the cultures and legends of both Mexico and the Southwestern United States. *Fiesta Jarabe* is a classic example of these themes. The middle-aged couple have Native Mexican features and dance in celebration of a feast day. The woman is dressed traditionally for the occasion in a long swirling skirt, which is flounced and brightly colored. She has long dark hair reaching nearly to her waist. Her body is voluptuous, her hips and breasts accentuated by form-fitting clothes. She is theatrically made-up, her lipstick slightly smeared. The man has on workman jeans and cowboy boots with a serape thrown over his shoulder. The woman is nearly as tall as the man and looks him boldly in the eye; he focuses his gaze on her décolleté. There is a charge between them that is slightly combative, but mainly sexual; completely engaged in a mating ritual initiated by the

traditional celebration. The couple is timeless, neither modern nor clearly historical. The figures' archetypal stances are a face-off across the gender divide. The mestizo mix of Spanish and Native Mexican are embodied in this colorful and not-so-innocent-looking couple.

Jiménez's work often generated controversy, but he has said that he wants his work to encourage dialogue. He held the conviction that "the worst thing for a work of art is to be ignored. People can be affected by a work of art they hate if it makes them think. My work tries to make bridges within a community, and it can evoke controversy if it brings up issues people would rather ignore."<sup>1</sup> He has also said, "The purpose of public art is to create a dialogue."

**Clint Willour**

<sup>1</sup> Luis Jiménez, from an interview with Kathleen Whitney, 1996.