



## How Coco Illustrator Ana Ramírez González Extends Herself with Her Art

It's hard to believe she didn't begin drawing until she was 17. You've seen her work on Pixar's *Coco*, her gorgeous Google Doodles, and her children's book illustrations, most recently in *Kamala and Maya's Big Idea*. Ana Ramírez González sits talks with Alicia about falling in love with her craft, moving from Mexico to the U.S. for art school, and forging an uncertain career path by following her heart, overcoming rejection, and drawing inspiration from Mexican culture.

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Alicia Menendez:

I love animated films, so when I got the chance to talk with Ana Ramirez Gonzalez, an artist at Pixar's animation, I had a million questions. You've seen Ana's work on *Coco*, her incredible Google Doodles, like Kati Jurado, and her illustrations in the new children's book *Kamala and Maya's Big Idea*- which tells the real life story of Kamala Harris and her sister Maya's plan to build a neighborhood playground. Today Ana gives us a glimpse into the magic and teamwork that makes films like *Coco* so special and tells us how weaving her culture into her work helped her land and then excel at her dream job.

Ana, if I opened up one of your notebooks from grade school and high school, how much doodling would I find in the margins?

Ana Ramírez González:

You know, not that much. I didn't used to draw growing up, because I was a figure ice skater, and I skated competitively since I was six, up until I was like 15 or something. Then my mom was like, "Why don't you take a drawing class?" I'm so happy that she did and so glad that they would even suggest art school for me. In high school, actually, she kind of almost forced me to take this drawing class, against my will almost, but she was like, "Just try it out. If you don't like it, you don't have to go back. But please give it a try. I think you might like it." And so, she drove me to my first drawing class, and I was like, "Eh." But then I loved it, like after the first session I was like, "This rules! This is the best! This is what I want to do forever."

I didn't actually start drawing until I was maybe 17. Yeah, 17 or something.

Menendez: When did you first decide to move to the States?

Ramírez González:

So, my mom had a cousin who lives in Chicago who, she was like, "Hey, can she go live with you for a year?" So, my aunt was an angel and she took me in for a year and I lived in Chicago, and that exposed me to a lot. It was kind of a huge cultural clash for me, because I grew up kind of sheltered, and in my small community, and knew everybody there, and it was just for a year, but I think it really shaped my view on things, and my world. And so, after that, I went back to Mexico, and then I started doing research once I started taking drawing classes, and my sister's best friend from childhood, who's also my friend, his name's Alonzo. He was starting at CalArts at the time in L.A., in California, so I met up with

Alonzo that summer, and it was the summer before I graduated high school, and he showed me his portfolio that he applied with and I was like, "I have to do this." And I was like, "How can this be college?" I was like, "I have to go to this school." And I'm a very stubborn person, and sort of obsessive sometimes when it comes to things that I really want to do, and I applied that year, but I didn't get in.

So, then I moved to France and I went there for two years, and it really helped me to start building my portfolio for CalArts. Because in my mom and my dad's head, I was just gonna stay in France, and I was gonna graduate there, but I was still like, "No, I have to go CalArts, because that's my dream." My dad was really worried when I applied to this school again, because I think they also didn't really think that I would get in. When I applied again after two years of the first time I got rejected, I did get in. And I had such a good time and it was magical.

So, I mostly decided to move to the U.S. because I just really wanted to go to this school, and that was like the main reason and the drive for me to come here, and because I loved animation, and film industries here, but all my family's still in Mexico. It's just me here.

Menendez: How did you land that first job after school?

Ramírez González:

My first job... So, it was actually during school, because at CalArts, we have a day called Portfolio Day, and it's a day in which a lot of people from the industry, from the animation industry, go to the school and look at our work. So, there's tables laid out in the main gallery, and students from first to fourth year, plus after you graduate, there's also a space for them.

Menendez: So stressful!

Ramírez González:

I know. It's so stressful. Yeah, it's very nerve wracking and like... But it's really exciting, too, because everyone's working towards that. So, that year my mom was visiting, because she came up to visit me, and she was staying with me, and then I stayed up, like I pulled an all-nighter, and she stayed up with me the day before, printing stuff out and laying out my portfolio and decorating it. So, we laid them out on these tables, right? And this was my third year, and I went in the morning. You lay them out at like 8:00 AM. You leave them there and then you leave. Like you're not even present to show your work. You disappear.

And then there's this blackboard at the end of the hallway with the lists of every studio that's attending, and three hours later, they write the names of the people they want to talk to, based on what they think about that work. I had never been called by Pixar or anything, like I was not targeting Pixar at all, because I'm like, "How?" It just was not in my radar, because they were incredible. So, I was like, "Whatever." I just wanted an internship anywhere, or a job, like something. I went back to my house with my mom and we both kind of fell asleep for that time because we were so tired.

And then I got a call from my roommate, who was at school, and she was like, "Oh my God. Ana, you have to get here right away. Come here. Your name is under the Pixar list." And I was like, "What? No way!" And I remember jumping around with my mom, and then we went to the school, and indeed my name was on the list, and then I talked to Harley Jessup, who production designed Coco. And he was doing the interviews himself, so I

talked to him and he was like, “Oh, I love your portfolio! It seems like you really love drawing from different cultures, and I love how you’re so colorful,” blah, blah, blah. And he’s like, “Yeah, send us your portfolio and we’ll get back to you.” And actually, my mom took a photo of that list, of the portfolio list, and she sends it to me every once in a while and she’s like, “Remember?” And I’m like, “Yeah.” Where it’s my name under Pixar.

Menendez: So sweet.

Ramírez González:

It’s very sweet. Yeah. But then eventually they got back to me, and they called, and I was... I happened to be touring Disney Imagineering that day, because I was selected with a group of other students to go pitch stuff to Imagineers, which was super cool. And I was on that tour with my friends, and then that day I found out. They called me and they were like, “Yeah, we just want to let you know you got the internship.” And you know, I graduated college, I didn’t have a job. I applied to like 15 jobs or so and didn’t get any of them, until eventually I got one, and I worked there for a little bit, but then they weren’t willing to sponsor me, because I know it’s not easy for everybody.

So, I left because I’m like, “Well, what am I doing here? It’s not for the money as much as I also really need to get sponsored so I can stay in the country.” So, I left, and then I kept applying to jobs, and then I landed a job with Google Doodles, with Google, and I started freelancing for them and doing Google Doodles for like Mexican Independence Day, and then we were starting a conversation of potentially converting me into full-time and stuff, and I was very excited about that. And that same month, I got a call from Harley, or an email, asking what I was doing. He’s like, “You know, I’m assuming you’re probably super busy with your new job.” And then he’s like, “But you know, I just wanted to ask if you were interested in coming back.” And I was like, “Oh my God. Yes.”

And so, I joined, and I moved to the Bay Area like two weeks after that email, and I started working on Coco. And I worked on that for like three years or so.

Menendez: What does a visual development artist do? Like what does the day to day look like?

Ramírez González:

Visual development. It’s we design everything that you see, basically, in the movie. We design costume, design character, design sets, color, and props, as well. Of course, not by ourselves, like we do first pass, so most visual developments draw by hand on paper, or in Photoshop, just mostly concepts, and we also contribute a lot of concept art to help storytelling, as well. So, we support storytelling with visuals, and once we come up with a concept, then we send it to the 3D department. Modelers and people who model the characters in 3D, and model the sets in 3D, and rig the characters, and then they send it to animation, who animate it.

Menendez: Wait, what do you mean rig the characters? What does that mean?

Ramírez González:

Rig is like articulation. I, for example, as a visual development artist, it’s our job to draw the characters and design them, right? Then once a concept is approved, then they send it to the modeler, who will do it in 3D, so it’s like sculpting in 3D, and then that person may articulate it or not, or send it to somebody who will rig it, and rigging is when they make it

so instead of it just being like a stiff sculpture, it has articulation, so that you can start moving it, and turn it into a puppet type thing.

So, then they send it to animation, so animation animates the model that has been rigged and modeled. And then there's shader, who adds texture and the color based on what we design, and we give them, as well. So, yeah, there's a lot of people involved. In my job, for example, I also help with storytelling a lot, because sometimes if I work with a new director, and they're just working on their pitch before it even is green lit, then it's my job to support their ideas and then come up with visuals, but also explore further and be like, "Hey, I took your idea and I thought about this other thing, too, like wouldn't it be cool if the characters could this or that?" And then support that with drawings.

Menendez: So, how much of your time, of your creative time, do you spend actually drawing, and how much of it do you spend in a process that gets you to the place where you're ready to draw?

Ramírez González:

Ooh, that's a very good question, actually. You know, research takes the longest. For example, if I... We usually have reviews every week. So, I'll check in with somebody every Friday, but I get a kickoff on Mondays. So, on Mondays, or maybe after the review then I get next steps, but usually if we talk about a week, maybe Monday is when I'm told what I'm gonna be working on and Friday is when I deliver So, from Monday through almost Thursday, I'm just doing research, and Googling stuff, or on Pinterest, or look at books in the library at Pixar, or talk to people, or ask people about certain things that I'm trying to research about. So, it's all of that, like first just compiling a bunch of stuff, and then after that I have to start really picking and choosing what works the best for the idea that I'm trying to convey.

And then I put that in a Keynote, or a presentation, like usually at Pixar I like printing out boards. Now that we're not able to do that, I've been using Keynote, so I just compile all the references there, and write notes, and kind of try to organize everything. And then once I have that, then I get into sketching, and I'm like based on the reference that I already have, what else can I build on top of this? So, then I just start coming up with ideas based on all that research that I already did, which makes it so much easier than just trying to look inside your imagination to find an idea. So, I do really need to do a lot of research to support my work, and I think it makes it stronger

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Menendez: So, when I watch Coco, where are your fingerprints? Where can I see them?

Ramírez González:

Oh my God. There's a lot. So, the opening, for example, the opening of the film with the papel picado, all of that I helped design, and I did a lot of those drawings by hand. That was really cool to work on, because that was done in 2D, so my drawings were used as I delivered it to them. Because usually, you know, I draw, and then someone else models it and stuff, but in this case, it was just like my actual drawings were in the shot. So, that was really cool. So, I helped design the opening, and then I designed all the patterns and stuff for Mama Coco's costume, and the dancers in the opening, as well. And did a lot of costume design for Miguel, too, and his mariachi outfit, and de la Cruz, and the set in which they sing Poco Loco, with the skull in the back, and I worked a lot on that set, and I did a lot of graphics for that set, as well. So, all the big billboards that you see in the background, I did a lot of those, as well.

Menendez: What was it like the first time you got to see it finished?

Ramírez González:

Oh, it was weird, because I had already seen so many versions of it that it didn't really hit me that it was done, done. But it is always extremely surprising to see the films finished, because there's so much that you don't see, and so much that they add at the end, like lighting is incredible, and they always make it look so much better than the last time we saw it. Every department betters your work. But I think I mostly just really felt emotional because my parents went to the premier with me, and my sister was there too. I just like seeing their faces, and how proud they were, and they were crying, and just so happy to be there, and I think it just hit me all at once, like, "Oh yeah, I think I've been working nonstop on this thing, that I haven't really taken the time to think about what this means for me, and my family, and the Mexican culture, too."

So, it was really nice, and just going to Mexico after that and seeing how into it people were, and how much they loved the songs and the movie, it's like... I don't know. It really made me very, very proud. It was great.

Menendez: It's so beautiful. I can't even think about it without crying.

Ramírez González:

I always cry too at the end now, and it's a very nostalgic time of my life, too, because I think I was going through a lot of transitions, but the only thing that was keeping me afloat was like the passion that I had to work on this movie, so it's very special.

Menendez: It is incredibly special.

Ramírez González:

You're gonna make me cry, too.

Menendez: Sorry. I'm sorry.

Ramírez González:

I cry so easily.

Menendez: It's just that it has layers to it, right? Where it's like you watch it the first time, and even though I am not Mexican or Mexican American, just the pride as a Latina in the fact that there is any representation of our culture, but then also as someone who is deeply invested in the question of immigration, and migrancy, and people's ability to move, and to be with their family, it just in such a beautiful way captures all of that, and the timing of the movie, and the timing of the release of the movie, and how then we had child separation happening in the background. It just... It couldn't have arrived at a better moment.

Ramírez González:

I agree. Yeah. It was very powerful to see people's reaction to it. I think it was very helpful for me, to get me thinking about a lot of those subjects, and what I need to get better at and use my voice for in the future.

Menendez: Kamala and Maya's Big Idea is the second book you have illustrated. The first is Maybe Tomorrow, which is a children's book about loss, grief, and empathy. I'm going to buy it. It looks so good.

Ramírez González:

Oh, thank you!

Menendez: It's so beautiful. How is illustrating a book different than illustrating a film?

Ramírez González:

Oh, it's very different. Actually, my first one was Miguel and the Grand Harmony. Yeah, the Coco book. Yeah.

Menendez: I couldn't tell which one came first. Okay, so your first one is that.

Ramírez González:

Yeah, so that really opened the doors for me, like it was crazy, because I had always wanted to try illustrating children's books, because I grew up on children's books, and my mom would literally take us to the book fair every year and just buy us a ton of books, and I loved them. I just loved looking at them. So, because I grew up with them, I wanted to get the chance to do it, too. When I was working on Coco, I once met the person in charge of the creative department of publishing at Pixar, and I was like, "Hey, Scott, if you ever look or need people to illustrate these books, I would love to. I just wanted to let you know that I'm super interested if that was ever an option. Just putting it out there."

He was like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. We'll keep you in mind." And this was like during my internship, when I was just trying to make friends and connect with people and stuff. But then once I came back and started working on the film, I had sort of forgotten about that, but then Scott remembered, and then he brought me up in one of the meetings, and then Lee and Harley were on board and they were like, "Yeah, she'd be great for it and perfect." And they were obviously trying to get Mexican or Latinx artists to work on these books, so it really worked out for me, and it was an incredible opportunity that has really opened so many new doors for me, so I'm so grateful for that.

And so, that was my first one. Second one was Maybe Tomorrow, which I got because of the publicity that the Coco book got, so then Scholastic reached out to me and were like, "Hey, we would love to work with you." So, that was really cool. And then and so on, and

then I got an agent, and all of this. But yeah, so the process is very different in some ways. When I'm doing the sketches for the books, it's pretty much storyboarding, because you're trying to convey a lot with one image, right? And in fact, I think this is even more raw. It's the most raw way of storytelling, in my opinion, because you have to say so much with so little. So, it's like really trying to be smart, and with what you do put on the pages, and how you can convey the story and the ideas behind it the best. So, it's storyboarding and finding the right shots, and the right compositions and emotions in the characters.

And also, the creative process is very different, because I actually don't really communicate with the authors, which is crazy to me. We usually communicate-

Menendez: Wait, what?

Ramírez González:

Yeah, like we usually communicate through our editors, who are... help facilitate that, and they talk to the writer, and then they talk to us.

Menendez: Who matches the person who writes the book with the person who illustrates the book?

Ramírez González:

Our agents do. For *Maybe Tomorrow*, because I didn't have an agent at the time, Scholastic reached out directly to me, and then we worked it out together, and I think it's because they saw the *Coco* book and then they showed my work to Charlotte, and then Charlotte liked it, so they're like, "Yeah, let's ask her." But then usually, if you have an agent, it goes through your agent.

Menendez: With *Kamala and Maya's Big Idea*, you were illustrating real people in a real neighborhood. How much did you rely on actual pictures and images as you were illustrating?

Ramírez González:

At the beginning of the story, the characters don't have anything. They just start with an empty patio or back yard, and the whole point is that they beautify it in the process, and they work really hard to make those changes, and come together as a community to make those changes, so I wanted to add all these flowers and details from the very beginning, and then they're like, "No, no. We can see that at the end, but we kind of have to tone it down and it has to feel a little bit more stale in the first half, and then as the story progresses, then you can feel free to add more details here and there." But it wasn't the most decorative book I've ever done; I think because of the context too.

Menendez: Here's my last question to you, which is for a fellow Latina who is listening, who wants to have a career in illustration and animation, what is your best advice?

Ramírez González:

There's so much, but I think my best advice is to do what your heart tells you. Ultimately, I think a lot of people, I've noticed that a lot of people, especially when it comes to the arts, are hesitant to go into the arts, because they think I maybe might never be able to make money out of this, or it's very competitive. It's hard. Or it's a lot of work. But everything good in life is, you know? Everything is competitive. Everything is difficult if you want to be good at it. Everything takes time. So, I think you should just always do what you love and you shouldn't be afraid to ask questions, and for feedback, and reach out to people that

you're inspired by, and ask them how they got there, because that might inspire you or they might have some resources that will help you. Asking for help, in my experience, has been a very rewarding thing. Also, sharing your work is very important, because if you don't share your work, no one will find it. But if you have an Instagram, for example, or a Tumblr or something, you can share your work there and people can see your work and your progress and give you specific notes based on your specific case and your art, as well.

Also, always try to draw from your personal experiences. I think that's very important and that's something that I learned later in life. In school, I think I was just studying a lot of the same artists that everybody else was, and copying them, and I think that's good to a certain extent, because it helps you figure out how they did what they did that make their work so good. I think what people will ultimately respond the most to is the work that is coming from your own perspective, because no one can deny that that is your own thing. In my experience, for example, if I hadn't drawn from my own culture and the things that inspire me from Mexico, in that one specific portfolio, I don't think I wouldn't have gotten the internship. I think the reason why I was noticed, or my work was noticed, was because of the content that I put in it.

So, I think just always pulling from your own experiences and telling your own stories is the most valuable thing in my experience.

Menendez: Ana, thank you. Thank you for taking the time to do this.

Ramírez González:

Of course. Thank you. I really appreciate you.

Menendez: And congratulations. The book is beautiful.

Ramírez González:

Oh, thank you so much. I'm so excited for people to see it.

Menendez: Thanks, as always, for joining us. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Cedric Wilson is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor. We love hearing from you. Email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com), and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you are listening, and please, please leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow as a community.

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