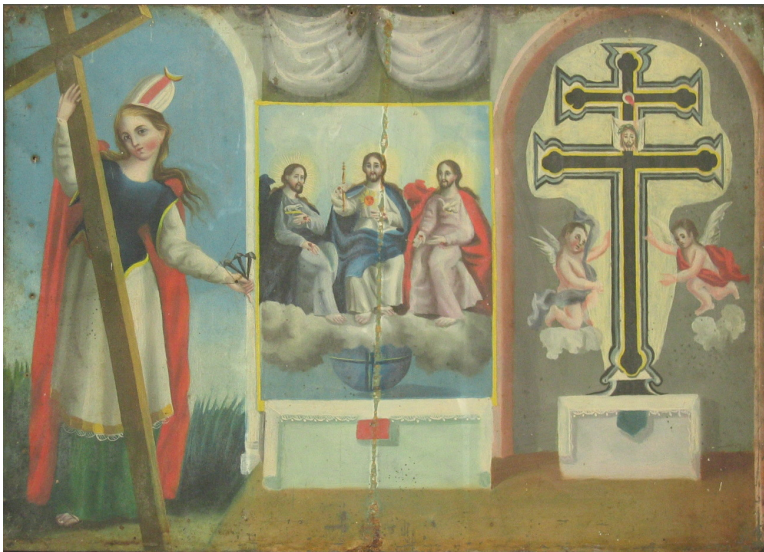


Pinturas de Fe: *The Retablo Tradition in Mexico and New Mexico*

University of Wyoming Art Museum, 2007
Educational Packet developed for grades K-12

Introduction



In this museum visit students will view the work of the Mexican retablo tradition (*Pinturas de Fe* Paintings of Faith) and of ex-votos. The Mexican retablo tradition blossomed during the 17th through 19th centuries. Originally, the Spanish conquerors used small devotional saint paintings to convert the indigenous peoples to Catholicism. Retablos soon became popular objects of personal veneration. Workshops specialized in specific images believed to provide protection, health, and prosperity. Ex votos are small devotional paintings related to a personal crisis requesting a favor or offering thanks.

Today, individual artists faithfully carry on the tradition of hand painted retablos, and contemporary artists from diverse cultural backgrounds draw creative inspiration from this popular art form.

This exhibition, organized by independent scholar Lane Coulter, provides viewers with an appreciation and understanding of this popular expression of religious faith through examples drawn from private and museum collections including the Museum of Spanish Colonial Art and the Museum of International Folk Art.

Triple retablo: St. Helen, the Trinity, and Cross of Caravaca, not dated. Maker unknown, Mexico. Painted tin. Private collection.

St. Helen traveled to the Holy Land in search of the True Cross upon which Jesus was crucified. She is shown holding the cross she found along with three golden nails. The Cross of Caravaca on the right is a double-barred crucifix on which Jesus is flanked by two winged angels kneeling in prayer. According to legend, this cross appeared miraculously in the Spanish town of Caravaca during the 14th century and contained a fragment of the True Cross. In Mexico, the Cross of Caravaca is widely believed to have the power to grant wishes and prayers. The middle image is the Trinity.

The exhibition is circulated under the auspices of TREX, the Traveling Exhibitions Program of the Museum of New Mexico, New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs, with support from MetLife Foundation and McCune Charitable Foundation.

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History

Pilgrimage, procession, and the creation of home altars and shrines are ancient religious practices that endure today in many cultures around the world. This exhibition tells the story of one such tradition as it evolved in the Americas from the time of the Spanish Conquest to the present day.

The popularity of retablos and ex-votos peaked in the late

19th century with the introduction of tin, an inexpensive surface to paint on. The tradition traveled north to New Mexico, where artisans painted retablos on wooden panels. By the turn of the 20th century, the availability of inexpensive prints destroyed the market for painted retablos. Inspired by the Chicano movement of the 1960s, New Mexican artists led a retablo revival.

Pinturas de Fe/Paintings of Faith

Pinturas de Fe presents the popular Hispanic religious art tradition of retablos. This tradition began in Mexico and the American Southwest in the eighteenth century and flourished there throughout the nineteenth century. The European-Styled images found on retablos were originally derived from large paintings mounted behind the altar (or retable) in the gilded cathedrals of Mexico City, but these small folk paintings were created for use on home altars of the devout or in small village churches. Retablos celebrate devotion to Jesus, Mary, the Archangels, a variety of sacred shrines, and most commonly, the numerous saints of the Catholic faith.

The closely related tradition of ex-voto painting features illustrated stories depicting miraculous interventions by the saints in various human tragedies.

Retablos

Retablos are devotional paintings depicting the patron saint of a family or a saint venerated in the village church. They were first painted on canvas and wood, then on hand-hammered copper plates. The paintings proliferated in the nineteenth century when inexpensive sheets of tin, imported to Mexico from Europe, became available to the artists. Retablos are often called laminas in reference to these tin sheets. Many were presented in highly embossed and decorated tin frames.



Tree of David-Lineage of Jesus (El Arbol de David), 19th century. Maker unknown, Mexico. Painted tin. Private collection.

This is the original family tree. It traces the lineage of Jesus back to King David, who is shown with his harp.

Artists and assistants, working together in small workshops, created thousands of retablos, providing a steady supply of affordable religious images to the people of Mexico. At the end of the nineteenth century hand-painted retablos fell from favor and were replaced by commercial chromolithographs from France and Germany.

Ex-votos



Ex-voto, 1860 (horse race) Maker unknown, Mexico Painted tin Private collection

José Contreras has been thrown from his horse and is being cared for by his son.

Ex-votos are modest narrative paintings offering thanks to religious figures prayed to in times of serious illnesses or tragic accidents. In images of Jesus, Mary, or a patron saint, ex-votos exhibit the deep religious faith of their storytellers. Complete with written tales and dates, ex-votos provide insight into the everyday culture and lives of the people of Mexico in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

While the painted retablo tradition was superseded by inexpensive commercial prints, the very personal stories told in the ex-votos in words and pictures allowed this tradition to continue well into the twentieth century.

New Mexican Retablos/ Los Retablos Nuevomexicanos

New Mexican was first settled by Europeans in the early seventeenth century as part of New Spain by Spanish immigrants who came up the Camino Real (the King's Highway) from Mexico. After Mexican independence in 1821, New Mexico became a remote province of Mexico. In 1846 it became a Territory of the United States.

The early churches of northern New Spain (New Mexico) were initially outfitted with santos, oil paintings and sculptures of saints, imported from Mexico or created in New Mexico by the Franciscan Friars. In the late eighteenth century, local santeros, or saint makers, influenced by these oil paintings, began to paint their own retablos using watercolors on hand-adzed pine boards. New Mexican santeros, including Raphael Aragon and Pedro Fresquis, produced many retablos during the first half of the nineteenth century. They were followed by artists such as Juan Ramon Velasquez in the latter half of the century. The era of the traditional New Mexican Santero ended with the work of Jose Benito Ortega in 1907.

Contemporary New Mexican Retablos/ Los retablos contemporaneous de Nuevo Mexico

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Federal government established programs throughout the country to support artists and craftsmen and provide vocational training in the arts. In New Mexico the Works Progress Administration, or WPA, hired a number of Hispanic artists to research and recreate examples of early retablos found in private and museum collections. Others were hired to research and develop illustrated workbooks for classes in the traditional arts taught by descendents of traditional artists.

The Spanish Colonial Arts Society, founded in the 1930s to support these efforts, began hosting a traditional Spanish art market in Santa Fe in the late -1960s. The market expanded in the 1970s and flourished in the 1980s, even adding a children's section. Spanish Market is now held twice a year and has become a popular and continuing venue for the contemporary santeros of New Mexico. These artists no longer feel limited by tradition in terms of size or media but even create wall murals and santos painted on low-rider custom cars.

Statements about the retablo and ex-voto tradition

The tradition of retablos was born as new legislation sought to separate church and state in 19th century Mexico. In reaction Mexicans began to build altars for worship in their homes. Retablos typically feature a painting of one saint on a tin plate and were hung in homes as part of a shrine.

The paintings were not viewed as artwork by those who owned or painted them, but rather symbols of their faith. . . The retablos worked as friends and protectors to the homes and were usually located in the main living areas.

Ex-votos are paintings that were placed at pilgrimage sites and tell the story of a miraculous cure or rescue by a holy figure. Each has text at the bottom giving the details, date and persons involved in the event.

—Charles Lovell and Elizabeth Netto Calil Zarur



Ex-voto, 1959 (gun battle). Maker unknown, Mexico. Painted tin. Private collection.

This retablo, dedicated to El Niño de Atocha, depicts a gun battle that occurred during the Cristiano Revolt of the 1920s.

Lesson Overview

Students will learn about the history of the retablo tradition and of ex-votos. They will explore the ideas; religious, spiritual, and cultural behind the many retablos and ex-votos. They will closely observe the retablos and ex-votos and determine what these paintings depict and convey to them. Students and teachers will consider the concepts behind the art work, and how they fit into the ideas of tradition in the Mexican culture.

In the Shelton Studio students will be given the opportunity to create personal symbols that communicate a message about themselves or something that is important to them. The students may model a retablo or ex-voto in the exhibition or create their own symbols and metaphors of meaning representing something significant in their lives.

Students and teachers may research and engage in conversations about the *Pinturas de Fe* before arriving at the art museum, using the study guides (available online) to explore ideas. While here they will spend time in the galleries closely observing the work, discussing it, writing about it, and even sketching it. They will begin conversations about the theories behind the work which will lay the groundwork for future opportunities to pursue these ideas in their home classrooms and schools.

Essential Questions

Grades K-6

- Why do people paint or create art when something bad is happening or has happened? Or even when they are worried about something bad happening?
- How does the creation of art make them feel in times of suffering?
- What is a miracle?
- What is inspiration?
- What is faith?
- How are these three the same and different?
- How can they help to create art?
- What is a retablo?
- What is an ex-voto?
- Can art help people in pain feel better about living?
- What do the paintings show us about the Mexican culture?
- How can we represent a Saint in art?

Grades 6-12

- Can art heal people who are suffering? How?
- How does faith, religion, and belief influence art?
- How did these paintings of faith, religion, and belief become classified as art? What is art? What is folk art?
- What symbols can you name and what do you think they represent?
- What ideas or concepts about life do you think about when you look at these retablos and ex-votos?



Art Questions to consider

Grades K-6

- What do you see?
- What people, animals, saints and objects can you find in the paintings?
- What feelings do the colors give you when you look at the retablos and ex-votos?
- What kinds of paint strokes do you see? Wide, thin, broken?
- What do the retablos and ex-votos make you think of while you are observing them?

Grades 6-12

- How did these painters compensate for their lack of training and skills as artists?
- What techniques did the painters use in producing the retablos and ex-votos?
- How is it different to paint on wood, leather, tin and glass?
- What is the difference in using water-based paints, acrylics and oil paints?
- How can we represent an animal, object, place in one-dimensional art making?
 - What are the different techniques used in painting with a brush and with various widths and kinds of brushes?
 - How can you show the emotions of the people in pain and suffering with paints and brushes on different surfaces?
 - How can you show that a Saint is different than an ordinary person?

St. Angelo the Martyr (San Angelo, Mártir),

19th century

Maker unknown

Mexico

Painted tin

Private collection

This unusual retablo image shows the martyred Sicilian Saint Angelo. An axe, the symbol of his martyrdom, is sticking out of his head.

Pre-visit activities

In order to prepare students for their museum visit and extend learning possibilities, we suggest that teachers and students consider the following activities.

- Students will read and research about retablos and ex-votos of the 19th century through today's versions of retablos and ex-votos.
- Students will read and research about the Spanish and Mexican cultures who produced the retablos and ex-votos.
- Students will research information on some of the artists.
- Students will explore the different materials that the artists used to paint on and the paints they used to create their retablos and ex-votos with.
- Students will explore various techniques the artists used in creating this art.
- Students will explore the Spanish and Mexican influences on the art of making retablos and ex-votos.
- Students will explore contemporary ways that Chicano artists portray their faith, beliefs, and important personal events.
- Students will research the Spanish Market.

Prerequisite skills/knowledge

Museum staff will work with teachers to ensure that all projects are age and skills appropriate. At the very minimum:

- Students should have some familiarity with sketching and drawing objects.
- Students should be able to identify shapes and colors.
- Students should be familiar with some of the vocabulary words on the list below in this packet, such as; ex-votos, retablos, etc.
- Students should understand what a symbol and metaphor are and should be shown examples of the ways they might be drawn in a painting.



Holy Family (La Familia Sagrada), 1996

*Renee Lopez, age 12
Wood, gesso, paint, leather
Museum of Spanish Colonial Art,
Spanish Colonial Arts Society,
Gift of Nancy Reynolds*

This is a carved and painted contemporary retablo of the Holy Family made by Renee Lopez in 1996 when she was twelve years old. The Holy Family is the earthly family of Jesus, his mother, the Virgin Mary, and his father, Saint Joseph.

Vocabulary to know

Chicano – North American of Mexican origin

Conquistadors – Spanish soldiers and adventurers who conquered South and Central America in the 16th century, overthrowing Native civilizations and establishing Spanish colonies.

Ex-votos—A Mexican devotional painting, usually on tin, using words and imagery to describe a miraculous event credits to a holy figure. Ex-votos are displayed in churches and shrines to publicly express gratitude for the miracle

Folk art – Art created by artists who have had little or no formal art education. Folk Artists may work within established traditions or may create their own distinct art forms. Folk artists often demonstrate great ingenuity and creativity in overcoming technical difficulties.

Iconography – A readily recognizable image of visual symbol used to stand for a specific idea important to a culture or religion. Christian iconography, for example, includes halos, a white dove and

the cross. In Judaism, the Star of David stands for Judaism and the state of Israel, while in Buddhism the lotus leaf is a symbol of enlightenment. Icons can also be found in advertising and popular culture.

Milagros – meaning “miracle” in Spanish. A special object associated with a saint and carried for personal protection, good luck, etc. Milagros can represent specific objects, persons, or even animals, or they might represent concepts that are symbolized by the object represented in the milagro.

Retablo – From the word retable or “behind the altar,” the word retablo refers to devotional paintings on sheets of tin coated with iron, which depict saints and religious figures. Retablos are an art form that flourished during the second half of the nineteenth century in Mexico.

Sanctity – A quality or essence of the sacred, hallowed, blessed.

Santo/Saint and patron saint – A person who lives a holy life and is credited with at least one miracle. People and prophets with shrines. According to the Catholic belief, a Saint can intercede with God on behalf of people and is a person through whom divine power is made manifest. Patron saints are often chosen because an interest, talent or event in their lives overlaps with a special area. The Saint is officially commemorated with a feast day.

Santero(as) – Men or women who produce religious images like retablos.

Shrine – A chapel, church altar or place sacred to a saint, holy person, relic, etc.

Symbol – In art an image of something used to represent, typify or recall an idea or quality. An element of iconography.

Veneration – Regard with deep respect, revere on account of sanctity.

Museum Activities

Part 1

Time Frame: 45 minutes

- Students will closely observe the works of the *Pinteras de Fe* on exhibit in the museum.
- They will identify symbols and what they might represent.
- They will identify lines, shapes, forms, patterns, repetition, colors, light and shadow, techniques and style existing in the work.
- Students will discuss what they see with museum educators.
- They will explore the artists' retablos and ex-votos in relation to the Spanish and Mexican cultures and their religious beliefs.
- They will explore the concepts behind the retablos and ex-votos.
- Using worksheets, students will respond in writing or drawing to the work they see by recording their observations and their own thoughts about the work.
- Students will answer questions on a museum worksheet.
- Students will engage in discussions about their observations and their answers and sketches with one another and with the teachers.

St. Michael (San Miguel),
19th century
José Aragón
(born c. 1781-89,
died post-1850),
New Mexico
Pine, gesso,
water-based
pigments
Museum of
Spanish Colonial
Art, Spanish
Colonial Arts
Society Collection,
Bequest of Ann
and Alan Vedder

*St. Michael
is shown
vanquishing a
bearded devil
representing evil.*



Part 2

Time Frame: 45 minutes (minimum)

The following projects may be considered individually, or combined, or museum staff will work with teachers to develop specific projects which support ongoing classroom work.

- Students will explore cultural symbols and meanings behind the retablos and ex-votos by drawing and painting on various materials such as wood, tin, or copper foil, in the Shelton Studio. Mexican music will be played while they draw to give them a sense of the attitude and spirit of the Mexican and New Mexican painters.
- Students will create a painting of symbols that will communicate an idea about some concrete examples that have meanings in their lives, for instance; they might communicate what pride is and how it makes them feel by showing concrete symbols of soldiers fighting in Iraq for the United States; they might paint pictures of family members hugging them or being kind to them to demonstrate love. The students might play their own favorite songs to help them create something of meaning to them.
- Students will explore drawing and painting techniques used in making a retablo or ex-voto or both.

Post-visit activities

We have found that students achieve maximum benefit from a museum visit when time is scheduled for post-visit activities. Here are some suggestions;

- Students discuss or write about their museum experiences, reviewing what they learned, what has special meaning for them, how they will use new information and skills.
- Students continue to research the retablos tradition and *Pinteras de Fe*.
- Students continue to create paintings with symbols and abstractions that relate to concrete things and meanings.
- Students research contemporary presentations of symbols of faith in the retablo tradition, such as murals and santos paintings on low-rider cars.

Suggested use in the curriculum

The study of the *Pinteras de Fe*, plus the historical and cultural knowledge they will gain from studying the work and ideas behind this exhibition tie to multiple curricular areas, including; art, history, social studies, music, geography, writing, reading, religious studies, philosophy, science and math. Museum staff will work with teachers to address specific Wyoming Teaching Standards and to align museum projects and studies with ongoing classroom curricular units.



Ex-voto, 1893, Maker unknown, Painted tin, Private collection

This painting is presented in its original tin and glass frame. The husband has lit a candle to plead with St. Joseph for help with his wife's illness.

Some recommended resources

Armstrong, Carole. *Lives and Legends of the Saints*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.

Cash, Marie Romero, Siegfried Halus. *Living Shrines; Home Altars of New Mexico*. Santa Fe, NM: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1998.

Durand, Jorge and Douglas S. Massey. *Miracles at the Border: Retablos of Mexican Migrants to the United States*, University of Arizona Press, 1995.

Egan, Martha. *Milagros: Votive Offerings from the Americas*. Santa Fe, NM: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1991.

Griffith, Jim. *Saints of the Southwest*. Tucson, AZ: Rio Nuevo Publishers, 2000.

Giffords, Gloria. *Mexican Folk Retablos*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1998.

Giffords, Gloria. *The Art of Private Devotion: Retablo Painting of Mexico*. University of Texas Press, 1991.

Giffords, Gloria. *Mexican Folk Retablos: Masterpieces on Tin*. University of Arizona Press, 1974.

Kalb, Laurie. *Crafting Devotions: Traditions in Contemporary New Mexican Santos*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1995.

Padilla, Carmella. *Low n' Slow: Lowriding in New Mexico*. Santa Fe, NM: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1999.

Sanderson, Ruth. *Saints Lives and Illuminations*. Grand Rapids; Eerdman Books for Young Readers, 2003

Steele, Thomas. *Santos and Saints: The Religious Folk Art of Hispanic New Mexico*. Santa Fe, NM: Ancient City Press, 1974.

Web Resources

www.mexicanretablos.com

www.nmsu.edu/~artgal/retablweb/

www.votiveart.com/

www.aspectosculturales.com

Materials to be supplied to each student

Materials for selected Shelton Studio projects are provided by the art museum.

Assessments and documentations of museum tour and studio experiences

In order to ensure that our museum tour program is meeting the needs of teachers and students, we ask that participants complete evaluation surveys. Surveys will be distributed to teachers and students, but they are also available on-line as a *pdf* file to be downloaded, or they may be requested via email from Wendy Bredehoft, Curator of Education, at wbredeho@uwyo.edu.

1. Students will self-assess using a quick survey that asks them to consider their response to the gallery discussions and research, and their studio experience.
2. Teachers will assess the overall visit by completing a quick survey that asks for their observation and assessment of students' experiences, as well as assessment of the overall process of the museum visit.
3. Museum staff and artists/teachers will record their observations and assessments.
4. When studio time permits, we will ask students to briefly discuss their art work completed in the Shelton Studio visit.
5. Museum staff may take photographs of students and teachers to document the learning taking place and the work produced during a museum visit. These are available upon written request to teachers who would like to use them to document the art of teaching and for student portfolios.



*The Captive Child (El Niño Cautivo), 19th century
Maker unknown, Mexico
Painted tin
Private collection*

The story of the Captive Child begins with a bulto, or carved wooden statue, of the Holy Child that was being transported on a Spanish galleon. Pirates boarded the ship and stole the bulto. The Child is shown wearing or holding leg irons to symbolize his captivity.