

Pinturas de Fe: The Retablo Tradition in Mexico and New Mexico
UW Art Museum, 2007

Gallery/Study Guide

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

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. Spanish Market and the Spanish Colonial Arts Society have played an important role in promoting the production and marketing of traditional retablos, and the transmission of the art form between generations.

For others the images endure on modern-day calendars, holy-cards, and prints, as well as on tattoos, a variety of trinkets, and perhaps most spectacularly on low rider cars.

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 from diverse cultural backgrounds draw creative inspiration from this popular art form.

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. 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-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 every day 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.

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 retablo) 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, and many other saints.

Keeping in mind that the stories presented in the visual imagery of *Pinturas de Fe* are deeply rooted in personal faith and experience, let's explore this exhibition.

- What type of imagery do you see presented here? How would you describe it (i.e. scary, sad, uplifting, personal)?
- 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 do you think the creation of art makes them feel in times of suffering? How does it make them feel in times of joy?
- What is a miracle? What is inspiration? What is faith? How are these three the same and different?
- How can these concepts help to create art?
- Can art heal people who are suffering? How?
- How does faith, religion, and belief influence art?
- Why do you think these paintings of faith, religion, and belief have become classified as art?

- What symbols can you identify in these works of art and what do you think they represent?

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.

- What ideas or concepts about life do you think about when you look at these retablos and ex-votos?
- Pick two of each (retablo and ex-voto) in this exhibit and explain what you think is going on in each painting.
- What types of frames do you see accompanying the art work in this exhibition? Why are some of the frames ornate and others plain?
- What types of materials have been used to make the frames?

If you could design your own retablo or ex-voto, how would it look?

Use the following questions to assist in planning your own design. Your retablo or ex-voto does not have to be religious in nature; it could be about a personal challenge that you overcame, or about someone you know needing extra support coping with a difficult situation. Use paper and pencil to sketch out your ideas.

- Will you paint it on tin, wood, glass or leather if you have those materials available to you?
- What colors will you use? Do the colors have any significance for you?
- What symbols will you choose to represent important elements of your story?
- What type of ornamentation will you include? Will the frame be plain or fancy?
- Where will you display your art work?

Vocabulary to know

Chicano – North American of Mexican origin

Conquistadors – Spanish soldiers and adventurers who conquered South and Central America in the 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.