

ART REVIEW

Angels on the Border: Religious Paintings by Mexican Immigrants

Hwa Young Caruso, Ed. D. & John Caruso, Jr., Ph. D.
Art Review Co-Editors

In the spring of 2006, Princeton University held a 3-week-long exhibition of 58 small format (7" x 10") devotional religious paintings in Aaron Burr Hall commissioned by Mexican immigrants to the United States. These small paintings on tinplate, zinc, wood, or copper are called *retablos* (altar pieces) or *retablos santos* (holy altar pieces) in Spanish. In Mexico they are referred to as *laminas* (metal plates).



The 2006 exhibition of personal folk art *retablos*, collected by Professor Douglas Massey at Princeton and Professor Jorge Durand at Universidad de Guadalajara, Mexico, spans some 80 years from 1912 to 1996. The exhibition's unifying theme is one of eternal gratitude and thankfulness. These *retablos*

portray the blessings of saints and the Trinity's protection of immigrants as they struggled across the border and survived the trials and tribulations of a new and often tenuous life in America. The collection is an emotional ethnic narrative of individual gratitude, running the gamut from a safe border crossing, finding a job, and maintaining good health to surviving the war in Vietnam.



The term *retablo* is derived from the Latin "retro tabulum" meaning "behind the (altar) table." This art form began with religious paintings that were placed behind the altars of European Catholic churches in the 11th century. The altarpieces varied in size and medium. They either stood behind the altars (*reredos*) or

on the altars (*retables*). The paintings, carvings, diptychs, and triptychs depicted saints, holy people, and religious scenes (Zarur & Lovell, 2001).



Religious paintings on tinplate were a necessary component of a Mexican family's Catholic home altar. The holy images and personal testimonies of thanks provided protection to everyone in the family. *Retablos* were initially popular in the Mexican states of Zacatecas, Durango, Queretaro, Jalisco, and San Luis Potosi and later appeared in other parts of Mexico. The plates were framed in wood or tin and often nailed to the

wall. For 100 years (1820-1920) the *retablo* cottage industry flourished until color lithographs and inexpensive machine-made reproductions ended this religious art form (Giffords, 1992).

When tinplate sheets were first imported to Mexico from Great Britain and the United States in the early 19th century, they came in a standard size of 20" X 14" which was cut into smaller sections of 14" x 10", 7" x 10", and 7" x 5". Another source of blank sheets for *retablos* were pieces of tin taken from lard or cooking oil containers (*hojalata*) that were cut and trimmed into non-standard sizes. The *retablo* artists used a limited color range of metallic paints (usually red, blue, green, yellow and flesh tones) to complete the work. The low humidity of central and northern Mexico produces little rust on metal objects. The combination of a low rust climate and generous applications of commercial metallic oil paints gave the *retablos* a long life. As the paintings age, however, they lose their sheen and gloss and appear more subdued and somber than their original bright statements.



The identities of most of the self-trained artists, called *retablista* or *pintor de retablos*, who painted the unsigned *retablos*, remain

unknown. They acquired their skills through solitary practice or by serving as apprentices. The artists reproduced commissioned paintings and wood carvings from Catholic iconography in a baroque style. The most common scenes in the painted folk artworks are manifestations of the Holy Virgin (especially the miracles of Guadalupe) and the refuge of sinners, both of which are usually set against a simple background. The benefactors of divine intervention are depicted as supplicants kneeling in perpetual gratitude in a stage-like setting.

The Virgin or Lady of Guadalupe (*Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*) is Mexico's patron saint and often referred to as the "brown skin virgin" (*Virgen Morena*). According to legend, the Virgin appeared on a barren hill called Tepeyac near Mexico City in 1531 to a local Aztec named Juan Diego. Through a series of religious events, a shrine was dedicated to the Virgin in the 1550's, followed by a church in 1709 and a basilica in 1904. Many *retablos* include images of the Virgin dressed in the royal garb of Empress Carlota, wife of Emperor Ferdinand Maximilian who ruled Mexico from 1864 to 1867 (Zarur & Lovell, 2001).

The Mexican *retablo* is a hybrid of Spanish religious iconography and the rich, vivid colors of indigenous folk art for which Mexico is renowned. The hybridity of these commissioned artworks represents a confluence of traditional imagery and the emotional and spiritual circumstances the purchaser wanted portrayed. The handwritten dedication, usually at the bottom, explains the events, the intervening spiritual force, and lists the name(s) of the grateful person(s).



Occasionally a *retablo* became a collage when the artist pasted or attached a paper image of the patron's favorite saint or a photograph of the supplicant on the flat surface (Durand & Massey, 1995).

These devotional ex-votos (votive images) all contain a brief narrative of a crisis, the intervention of the Holy Spirit, and a dedication of thanks for the blessing that saved the individual or family. Most of the 58 personal



paintings and their narratives in the Princeton exhibition dealt with divine intervention to resolve health conditions, medical operations and serious car accidents.

The religious figures and images in a *retablo* adhere to the Catholic church's official clothing and spiritual attributes. Anatomy and perspective are not important in these two-dimensional artworks except for the dominating and hierarchical scale of the holy persona. The simplistic poses and hand-printed spiritual narrative on an inexpensive, durable surface express the essence of simple, universal folk art. Most of these works are small scale in the tradition of Persian miniatures. In this small space the powerful emotional messages touch, move, and involve most viewers.



The exhibition *Angels on the Border* is a poignant reminder of life challenges experienced by many of the current 12,000,000 illegal immigrants in America, 80% of whom are from Mexico. Their survival stories frame the contemporary debate over diversity, equity, social integration, and citizenship. Their personal journeys may be retold in photographs, video, and audio narratives, but no longer will they be painted on a tin *retablo*.

References

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