

PALACE OF THE GOVERNORS



EL FAVOR DE LOS

Santos

Curriculum · Teacher Guide · Activities

BRINGING ART, HISTORY, AND CULTURE
TO PARENTS AND TEACHERS

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Exhibition Overview

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 native cultures and Conquest to the present day.

The Mexican *retablo* tradition blossomed during the 17th through 19th centuries. Originally, the Spanish missionaries used small devotional saint paintings to convert native 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.

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. 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, *El Favor de los Santos*, 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 International Folk Art and the Museum of Spanish Colonial Art.

Historical Background

More than just an art form, *retablos*—like many cultural art forms—are also representative of the political and historical environment of their time. The works in the exhibition were made during this timeline:

1810 – 1830

New Mexico's *Mexican Period* began September 15, 1810, with *El Grito de Independencia* (The Cry of Independence). The *Zócalo* of Mexico City was filled with people celebrating their freedom from Spain.

Those who rejoiced had no idea of what was to come: a tumultuous political time for both Mexico and her northern frontier, New Mexico. It took twenty more years for Mexico to complete its separation from Spain (1821) and formalize its declaration of independence.

1835 – 1855

During General Santa Anna's eleven intermittent presidencies, Texas declared independence (1836) and joined the United States (1845). At the end of the Mexican-American War California, Arizona, and New Mexico were ceded to the U.S.

A "presidential dictator," the general claimed he detested military dictatorship yet named officers to succeed him and other highranking legislators. Such appointments further destabilized Mexico's political scene.

1848

After the Mexican-American War, New Mexico was purchased by the U.S. from Mexico. An unwillingness to acknowledge previous laws on land and the omission of Article X created confusion and set the stage for lawlessness and political corruption.

Spiritually, New Mexicans transcended the new border by emphasizing devotion to their religion and heritage through art. *Patria* was preserved through images created on hides, wood, tin, canvas, or metal.

1858 – 1861

Secular leaders believed the church was depleting an already hemorrhaging economy, causing social unrest and poverty. Liberals, arguing Enlightenment philosophies, locked horns with Catholic Conservatives. Their fighting and political manipulations led to mass destruction and bloodshed.

Tensions between the state and the church led many Mexican Catholics to practice their own form of religion in the privacy of their homes.

1862 – 1867

Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian was a prince without a kingdom. In 1862, the French and Conservatives invaded Mexico, were pushed back at the Battle of Puebla (*Cinco de Mayo*), but still managed to make Maximilian emperor (1864).

In 1867, the French were defeated, Maximilian was executed, and Benito Juárez reinstated the Republic. Juárez broke the "relics of colonial government" and tried to create a social environment to consolidate Mexico and bring economic freedom.

1876 – 1911

Porfirio Díaz became president of Mexico by military force. The Díaz dictatorship was founded on self-election to the presidency seven times in 35 years.

The *Porfiriato*, a monarchy masquerading as a republic, triggered one of the greatest economic gaps in Mexican history. The lavishness of the elite and unrelenting disregard for the poor, education, and the church fanned the flames of political and social upheaval. And the people revolted—starting the Mexican Revolution.

Curriculum Integration

Research shows that students who are prepared for a field trip get more out of it.

The following lesson plans may be used by teachers or parents before a visit the to exhibition.

The Exhibition Overview, Historical Background, and Suggestions for Docent Tours can also function as supplemental material.

ESTIMATED TIME

45 minutes

MATERIALS

- ✦ Writing supplies

VOCABULARY

Identify words discussed on the tour.

These may include:

- ✦ *Ex-votos*
- ✦ Chicano
- ✦ *Milagros*
- ✦ *Santos*
- ✦ *Conquistadores*

STANDARDS MET

National Standards for English
Language Arts (for K–12)
Standards 3–12

EXTENSIONS

Students create a bulletin board exhibit about *retablos*.

Invite an artist to visit school to speak about their art-making processes and experiences. Artists are all around us! Perhaps a classroom parent makes art.

Write a thank you note to the docent who toured students in the exhibition and invite them to view the students' own *retablos*.

GOAL

To reflect on the field trip experience to *El Favor de los Santos*.

STUDENT LEARNING

Students write about their experiences on the field trip and communicate what they have learned.

PROCEDURE

Discuss the field trip: what did we see? What were our favorite parts? Were there any surprises? What was something new we learned? What questions do we still have? If students created *retablos* compare and contrast elements of students' own *retablos* with the ones they saw in the exhibition.

Students **write** for 10 minutes and reflect on the exhibition. They may draw in addition to writing. Prompt students with phrases to reflect upon, for example: "I never knew that..." "It reminded me that..." "What is one new idea you are taking away from this experience?"

Students **share** their writings in student-led class discussion of subjects and ideas that arose during visit to the exhibition. **Create a list** of broad themes or questions on chart paper and categorize these issues.

Divide students into small groups and assign each group a category to follow up on. Where can we find more information?

Students **research** on the Internet or in the library and report findings to class or create an original work of art that communicates how they feel about the chosen theme, message, idea, or subject.

SUGGESTED FORMS OF ASSESSMENT

- ✦ Student writing
- ✦ Shared discussion
- ✦ Small group research and presentation

ESTIMATED TIME

Two 45-minute sessions

MATERIALS

- ✦ Image of *retablo* from *El Favor de los Santos*
- ✦ Cardboard (8" x 12", or smaller) one for each student
- ✦ Tin foil
- ✦ Tempera paint
- ✦ Glue
- ✦ Magazines to be cut up

VOCABULARY

Identify words discussed on the tour.
These may include:

- ✦ *Retablo*
- ✦ Veneration
- ✦ Shrine

STANDARDS MET

National Standards for English
Language Arts (for K–12)
Standards 4, 5, 7, 10–12

National Standards for Arts
Education, Visual Arts Content
Standards 1–5

EXTENSIONS

Students write a description of their *retablo* to be displayed with the artwork in a classroom exhibit.

Older students may research the use of personal shrines from other cultures.

GOAL

To prepare students for a field trip to *El Favor de los Santos*.

STUDENT LEARNING

Students create their own *retablos*, communicating a message about themselves or something that is important to them.

PROCEDURE

Discuss the field trip: What will we see? What is a *retablo*? Look at the *retablo* image together. What is happening in this image? Discuss the story behind the image and note the use of symbols. (See supplemental material regarding *retablos*.)

Explain that students will be creating their own *retablo*, or personal shrine. A personal shrine does not have to be religious; it can focus on something that is important to an individual. Ask students to **share** what they might include in a personal shrine, e.g. hobbies, family members, beliefs, and memories.

Give each student **cardboard and foil**. Instruct them to cover the cardboard with a piece tin foil, keeping the foil as smooth as possible (if the foil will not stay flat on the cardboard, tape it down on the back).

Students **paint** their own *retablo* on the foil. (Students could paint a tribute to something that is important to them a self portrait, a depiction of an important moment in their lives, etc.)

After the paintings have dried, students may **collage** images on top of their *retablos*, using photographs, images from magazines, words, etc. Students should leave a border of tin foil, or make sure some can be seen through the work.

Students **present** their *retablos* to the whole class, noting choices they made, images they used and the overall message of their work.

SUGGESTED FORMS OF ASSESSMENT

- ✦ Discussion of what students might include in their *retablo*
- ✦ Observe students work
- ✦ Artwork and/or written descriptions produced

ESTIMATED TIME

45 minutes

MATERIALS

- ✦ Image of *retablo* from *El Favor de los Santos*
- ✦ Writing material
- ✦ Colored pencils

VOCABULARY

Identify words discussed on the tour.

These may include:

- ✦ *Retablo*
- ✦ Symbolism
- ✦ Iconography
- ✦ Metaphor

STANDARDS MET

National Standards for English
Language Arts (for K–12)
Standards 4, 5, 7, 10–12

National Standards for Arts
Education, Visual Arts Content
Standards 1–5

EXTENSIONS

Students make a large version of their personal symbol in construction paper to hang in the classroom.

Students incorporate symbols into their own *retablos*.

GOAL

To prepare students for a field trip to *El Favor de los Santos*.

STUDENT LEARNING

Students will create personal symbols that communicate a message about themselves or something that is important to them.

PROCEDURE

Explain that students will be taking a field trip to see an exhibition of *retablos*. **Share** an image of a *retablo* and ask students to look carefully. What do they see in the image? What stands out? *Retablos* use religious symbolism to communicate a deeper meaning or story. “The story in this *retablo* is...”

Discuss how information can be shared through symbols. What is a symbol? How might we communicate something symbolically? Provide some concrete examples (a wedding ring symbolizes marriage, the American Flag symbolizes the United States, an image of an airplane symbolizes a long journey).

In small groups, students **brainstorm** symbols that might represent themselves, their hobbies, family, beliefs, or memories (students may choose one or all). Each group reports back to the whole class. **Record** these ideas on chart paper.

Individually, students **draw** a symbol of themselves, their family, their community, or their values and write a detailed explanation of their symbol.

As a whole class, students **share** their symbols, describing their rationale, choices they made, images they used and the overall message they are communicating.

SUGGESTED FORMS OF ASSESSMENT

- ✦ Discussion of *retablos* image and symbolism
- ✦ Small group reports
- ✦ Observe students work
- ✦ Artwork and/or written descriptions produced

Symbols Worksheet

ILLUSTRATE YOUR SYMBOL

WHAT DOES YOUR SYMBOL MEAN?

Vocabulary

Chicano North American person of Mexican origin

Conquistadores 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 credited 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 little formal art education and/or are self-taught. Folk artists may work within established traditions (as did *retablo* artists) or innovate their own distinct art forms. Folk artists often demonstrate great ingenuity and creativity in overcoming technical difficulties.

Iconography A readily recognizable 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 is a symbol of the Jewish faith 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.

Milagro Means “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 a specific miracle.

Retablo From the word *retable* or “behind the altar.” The word *retablo* refers to devotional paintings on sheets of tin which depict saints and religious figures. *Retablos* are an art form that flourished during the second half of the nineteenth century in Mexico. In other areas along the *Camino Real*, *retablos* were often made from other types of materials, such as hides or wood. These *retablos* were painted with tempera paints instead of the oil paints used on tin *retablos*. Today, *santeros* use everything from computer components to lowriders as canvases for their *retablos*.

Santo / Saint and Patron Saint

A person who lived a holy life and is credited with at least one miracle. According to Catholic belief, a saint can intercede with God on behalf of people and is a person through

whom divine power is made manifest. People often choose a patron saint because an interest, talent or event in their lives overlaps with a situation or event in the saint’s life. Saints are officially commemorated with feast days.

Santeros / Santeras Men or women who produce religious images such as *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 To regard with deep respect, revere on account of sanctity.

Note: Some text excerpted from the NMSU Resource Guide, *A Selection of the NMSU Retablo Collection Exhibition*.

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Suggestions for Touring the Exhibit

EXHIBITION THEMES

We hope that visitors to the exhibition will come away with an understanding and appreciation of three things:

- ✿ The particular devotional art form of the Mexican and New Mexican *retablo*.
- ✿ The continuity and change within this art form, from the Mexican Period through the present day.
- ✿ *Retablos* and *ex-votos* as not only religious iconography but also as a reflection of New Mexico history during the Mexican Period, when cultural and physical migration, and trade influenced the evolution and maintenance of culture, ideas, and material forms of expression.

INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

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 native cultures and Conquest to the present day. The Mexican *retablo* tradition blossomed during the 17th through the 19th centuries, when workshops specialized in producing specific imagery believed to provide protection, health, and prosperity.

Until recently, museums and art collectors had overlooked these humble utilitarian objects in favor of the more sophisticated forms of sacred art. Today *retablos* are increasingly admired for their spiritual power and energy. They are attracting interest for what they tell us about the lives, culture, and communities of the people who made and used them, and how those traditions carry on today.

MEXICAN RETABLOS

Originally, Spanish conquerors used small devotional saint paintings to help convert the native peoples to Catholicism. The popularity of hand-painted *retablos* peaked during the late 19th century with the introduction of mass-produced sheets of tin-coated iron, which provided an inexpensive surface to paint on. *Retablos* soon became popular objects of personal veneration.

Workshops specialized in producing specific imagery and made many copies of paintings brought from Europe. These *retablos* were sold in shops, marketplaces, and near pilgrimage sites.

Ex-votos are small devotional paintings asking for intervention or offering thanks related to a personal crisis—illness, accident, or natural disaster. Unlike *retablos*, which were mainly used for private devotion in the home, *ex-votos* were publicly displayed in a church or shrine.

By the turn of the 20th century, the availability of inexpensive prints destroyed the market for hand-painted *retablos*. Because of the personal nature of *ex-votos*, there is no way to mass-produce them, and that tradition has endured up to the present day.

NEW MEXICAN RETABLOS

The *retablo* tradition traveled north to what is now New Mexico along *El Camino Real*, the main route traveled by traders and settlers from Mexico. Artisans in New Mexico did not have ready access to tin, so they painted their *retablos* on hides and wood.

Suggestions for Touring the Exhibit

A new view of the colonial era *santeros* in New Mexico has been put forward in a recently published book — *A Tapestry of Kinship: The Web of Influence Among Asultores and Carpinteros in the Parish of Santa Fe, 1790–1860* — by genealogist José Antonio Esquibel and Charles Carrillo, one of the *santeros* represented in the exhibition. Previous thought was that the colonial era *santeros* were itinerant artisans who traveled from place to place plying their trade. Through meticulous examination of documents and stylistic analysis, Carrillo and Esquibel paint a picture of a community of craftsmen who lived within one block of each other in Santa Fe, worshipped at the same church, and were bound together as brothers, husbands, neighbors, marriage sponsors, and godfathers to each other's children.

CONTEMPORARY RETABLOS

Inspired in part by the Chicano art movement of the 1960s, some artists in New Mexico led a revival of the *retablo* tradition. Like other civil rights movements of the time, the Chicano art movement sought to reclaim Mexican and Mexican-American history and cultural traditions that had been left out of the history books and the museums.

Today some *retablo* artists faithfully carry on the tradition using traditional materials, methods, and iconography. These artists no longer work in workshops, but families still pass down the tradition from generation to generation. They sell their works themselves, in galleries and shops, or at Spanish Market in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Other artists have chosen to update the *retablo* art form by using new kinds of media (such as computer components) and imagery that make reference to contemporary events. Still other contemporary artists from diverse backgrounds draw creative inspiration from this popular art form. Some of the images have entered popular culture and show up on lowrider cars and even as tattoos. Images of Our Lady of Guadalupe are particularly popular.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

What is a *retablo*? A *retablo* is a small devotional painting, painted on a sheet of tin-coated metal, hide or wood that is used for personal veneration. Most tin *retablos* were mass-produced in workshops.

Retablos are typically found as centerpieces of home altars or shrines among Catholic people living in South and Central America, Mexico, and what is now the southwest United States. Home altars are a form of religious practice common to many cultures, dating back to ancient times.

What other things would be on the altar besides *retablos*? In addition to *retablos*, an everyday altar would have other highly personal objects including flowers, candles, and other kinds of religious imagery and statuary, all carefully selected and arranged by the maker.

Today, a home altar might also include photographs, rosaries, or *milagros* — small metal charms representing body parts, animals, modes of transportation, or other things that connect to a story of struggle with illness or hardship or a journey. On holidays or other special occasions, special objects might be added to the altar.

Suggestions for Touring the Exhibit

Why are they called *retablos*? The word *retablo* is Spanish. Its literal meaning is “behind the table.” In large, elaborate European and Mexican churches of the Baroque period—from the 16th through the 18th centuries—altarpieces or altar screens were commonly placed behind the table where the priest celebrated mass.

Over time, the word *retablo* has come to refer to the small, humble devotional paintings that became very popular in Mexico and the American Southwest in the 19th century. Therefore, most of the *retablos* in this exhibition are not large or fancy like those in the big churches. Depending on their place of origin, there are other names for *retablos*, including *láminas*, *imágenes pintadas* (painted images), or *santos* (saints).

What is the purpose of a *retablo*? Throughout human history, there have been people who believe that sacred objects and images have the power to intervene in the lives of the devotee, to offer protection from illness or harm, or to ensure fertility or prosperity. In Catholicism, these sacred images include representations of Jesus, Mary, the Archangels, various saints, and stories from the Bible. Particular saints were chosen for specific appeals based on their attributes, and there were literally hundreds of them, from *San Ysidro* (Saint Isadore), the patron saint of farmers, to *San Antonio de Padua* (Saint Anthony of Padua), the patron saint of lost objects.

The Spanish brought devotional imagery with them to the New World to use to convert the native peoples. These images became popular forms of personal devotion. It is important to understand that the 19th century was a politically turbulent time in Mexico. There was great hardship and suffering from war and disease. Zacatecas, a center of *retablo* production, was also a center for mining, an occupation fraught with danger. It is not difficult to appreciate the role of faith for people in that time and place.

Where did the *retablos* in the exhibition come from?

In the 16th century, the Spanish conquered parts of the western hemisphere. Colonists followed the *conquistadores*. One of the first things the Catholic Church wanted to do was to convert the native peoples to Christianity. They used images of saints that they brought from Europe to aid the process. Later, native artists copied these images, and they became testaments of faith and devotion used in home altars.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the main center for the production of these *retablos* was in what is now central Mexico. But as traders and settlers moved north along *El Camino Real*, the road that connected Mexico City to Santa Fe, churches and pilgrimage sites sprang up along the route, and local artisans began to supply *retablos*.

Who made *retablos*? *Retablos* are particular images that were copied over and over again—some sold at shops, marketplaces, and near important pilgrimage destinations. A few academically trained artists made *retablos*, but most of the artists were self-trained. They didn’t usually sign their work, so today we can only figure out where some of the *retablos* were made or who made it if we can use comparison to recognize the workshop or the style of a particular painter.

By the end of the 19th century, the invention of inexpensive chromolithographs (color prints), created another source of holy images, and in the end the widespread availability of these alternatives drove the producers of hand-painted *retablos* out of business.

Why don’t the *retablos* look more realistic? The *retablo* artists did not lack the skill or understanding to paint more realistically. When the Spaniards arrived in the New World they encountered highly sophisticated pre-Columbian civilizations that had highly developed art forms of their own, and their own traditions of making home altars.

Suggestions for Touring the Exhibit

When the Spanish brought these native peoples realistically rendered European baroque depictions of saints to copy, the native artists did not just slavishly produce exact copies. They intentionally spiritualized the image by enlarging heads, shrinking bodies, flattening space, and simplifying shapes. Perhaps they did this to make the images look more like their own art. Perhaps they did it so that the holy person would not be mistaken for a regular person. Some scholars think that the Native artists did this to preserve aspects of their beliefs in images of the religion they were being forced to adopt, a kind of secret resistance. But we don't really know for sure.

Many contemporary artists, scholars, and collectors admire *retablos* today for the same qualities and spiritual energy in pre-Columbian and African art that inspired early 20th century modernist abstract artists. They have a direct emotional appeal, and they were made to be used and not just to be admired for their beauty or as status symbols.

What is an *ex-voto*? The word *ex-voto* comes from the Latin meaning "from a vow." An *ex-voto* is a small devotional image created as an offering in fulfillment of a vow or as an expression of a wish or vow. The *ex-voto* tells a personal story. The story might be about a person or group of people who miraculously survived a disaster or illness through the divine intervention of a particular saint. The image depicts the saint to whom the miracle is ascribed along with the incident, which is described below the image in words.

Unlike *retablos*, which are usually found in the home, *ex-votos* are made for public display. Shrines throughout New Mexico are covered with hundreds upon thousands of *ex-votos* left behind by grateful religious pilgrims.

How are *retablos* made? The earliest *retablos* were painted on copper, wood, or canvas. In the late 18th century the process of producing tin-coated iron was invented for tin roofing and other uses, and by the early 19th century this durable and inexpensive material had become the painting surface of choice for Mexican *retablo* artists.

The *retablos* were mostly painted with oil paints, in some cases over a coat of primer. The artisans in the north who began to make *retablos* did not have access to tin or oil paints, so they painted their *retablos* on pieces of animal hide or on wood panels, usually pine, and made their paints with natural pigments.

Is the *retablo* tradition still alive? For all intents and purposes, the hand-painted *retablo* tradition had died out by the end of the 19th century, however, the *ex-voto* tradition is still widely practiced in Mexico and New Mexico. The *retablo* tradition has experienced a revival in New Mexico as artists, inspired in part by the Chicano art movement that began in the 1960s, work to reclaim the history and traditions of Mexican and Mexican-American culture.

In Santa Fe, the Spanish Colonial Arts Society and Spanish Market have played a crucial role in promoting the production and marketing of traditional *retablos*. The children's section of Spanish Market encourages the transmission of these skills to the next generation of *santeras* and *santeros*.

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 lowrider cars, as illustrated in the exhibition. Many contemporary artists admire *retablos* and make reference to them in their work.

Web Resources

www.mexicanretablos.com

Commercial store in San Francisco, California. Images and background information on *retablos*.

artdepartment.nmsu.edu/faculty/zarursite/retablo/

Retablo collection of the New Mexico State University Art Gallery.

www.aspectosculturales.com

Santa Fe, New Mexico-based firm producing teacher resources to enhance awareness of Hispanic culture and history.

www.spanishcolonial.org

The Spanish Colonial Arts Society located in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a leader in the public education of traditional Spanish Colonial art.

www.colonialarts.com

Images and information regarding Spanish Colonial Arts and Mexican antiques.

www.catholic.org/saints

An index of Catholic Saints, including historical information and Saint Days.

www.museumeducation.org

Educational resources offered by the Museum of New Mexico.

www.moifa.org

The Museum of International Folk Art located in Santa Fe, New Mexico, recognized as home to the world's largest collection of folk art.

www.nmcn.org/heritage/folk_arts/

Curriculum guide with bibliography, picture gallery and internet resources related to folk art of New Mexico.

Notes

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing notes.

The exhibit *El Favor de los Santos: The Retablo Collection of New Mexico State University* is on display through April 20, 2008, at the Palace of the Governors on the Plaza in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

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Palace^{of}_{the} Governors
The New Mexico History Museum

