



TREASURES OF DEVOTION
Tesoros
de Devoción

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 *bultos* and *retablos* are religious practices that endure today in New Mexico culture. This exhibition tells the story of this tradition as it evolved in the Southwest from native cultures and conquest to the present day.

The New Mexican *bulto* and *retablo* traditions blossomed during the 17th through 19th centuries. Originally, the Spanish missionaries used devotional paintings of saints to convert native peoples to Catholicism. *Bultos* and *retablos* soon became popular objects of personal veneration. Workshops specialized in specific images believed to provide protection, health, and prosperity.

The tradition peaked in the mid-19th century in New Mexico, where artisans painted *retablos* on wooden panels. By the turn of the 20th century, the availability of inexpensive prints crippled the market for painted *retablos*. Today individual artists faithfully carry on the tradition of hand-painted *bultos* and *retablos*, and contemporary artists, from diverse cultural backgrounds, draw creative inspiration from this popular art form.

This exhibition, *Tesoros de Devoción: Treasures of Devotion*, provides viewers with an appreciation and understanding of this popular expression of religious faith through examples drawn from the Palace of the Governors' collection.

Introduction to the Exhibit

EXHIBITION THEMES

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

- ✿ *Bultos* and *retablos* are devotional art forms of Mexico and New Mexico.
- ✿ This art form has been constantly evolving, from the Spanish Colonial Period through present day.
- ✿ *Bultos* and *retablos* are not only religious iconography but also a reflection of New Mexico history during cultural and physical migration. Trade influenced the evolution and maintenance of this art form.

CULTURAL HISTORY BEHIND TESOROS DE DEVOCIÓN

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 *bulto* and *retablo* traditions blossomed during the 18th through the 19th centuries, when individuals and workshops specialized in producing specific imagery believed to provide protection, health, and prosperity.

Until recently, museums and art collectors had overlooked these handmade objects in favor of more academic forms of sacred art. Today *bultos* and *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.

NEW MEXICAN BULTOS AND RETABLOS

Originally, Spanish conquerors used small devotional paintings to help convert native peoples to Catholicism. The popularity of hand-painted *bultos* and *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 — and ceramic materials which could be more readily reproduced.

By the turn of the 20th century, the availability of inexpensive statues and prints destroyed the market for hand-painted *bultos* and *retablos*.

CONTEMPORARY BULTOS AND RETABLOS

There have been two revivals of *bulto* and *retablo* traditions. The WPA programs for arts in post-Depression New Mexico led to a resurgence, and then again in the 1960s, with the Civil Rights Movement. Like other civil rights expressions 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.

Historical Background

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

1779

The Treaty of Aranjuez between Spain and France secures Spain's participation and support of the United State's Revolutionary War.

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 20 more years for Mexico to formalize its declaration of independence.

1810 – 1855

During General Santa Anna's 11 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 to the exhibition.

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

Make Your Own *Retablo*

ESTIMATED TIME

Two 45-minute sessions

MATERIALS

- ✦ Image of *retablo* from *Tesoros de Devoción*
- ✦ Cardboard (8 x 12", or smaller) one for each student
- ✦ 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 *Tesoros de Devoción*.

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**. This will serve as a base for the *retablo*. Students may **collage** images on top of their *retablos*, using photographs, images from magazines, words, etc.

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



José Aragón
Santa Gertrudis la Magna
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ESTIMATED TIME

45 minutes

MATERIALS

- ✦ Image of *retablo* from *Tesoros de Devoción*
- ✦ Writing material
- ✦ Colored pencils

VOCABULARY

Identify words discussed on the tour.
These may include:

- ✦ *Bulto*
- ✦ *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 *Tesoros de Devoción*.

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 *bultos* and *retablos*. **Share** an image of a *retablo* and ask students to look carefully. What do they see in the image? What stands out? *Bultos* and *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 *bultos* and *retablos* imagery and symbolism
- ✦ Small group reports
- ✦ Observe students work
- ✦ Artwork and/or written descriptions produced

Symbols Worksheet

ILLUSTRATE YOUR SYMBOL

WHAT DOES YOUR SYMBOL MEAN?

ESTIMATED TIME

45 minutes

MATERIALS

✦ Writing supplies

VOCABULARY

Identify words discussed on the tour.

These may include:

- ✦ *Devoción*
- ✦ *Milagros*
- ✦ *Santos*
- ✦ *Santeros*

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 tour guide who toured students in the exhibition and invite them to view the students' own *retablos*.

GOAL

To reflect on the field trip experience to *Tesoros de Devoción*.

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.

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

Vocabulary

Bulto In Spanish, *bulto* means “to take space” or “to be bulky.” The three-dimensional, carved statues in the exhibit tend to be larger and have a sense of weight. Often, older *bultos* were put together in separate pieces. This way the statue could be moved and be placed in different positions for processions and family altars.

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 of saints and religious figures on flat surfaces. In areas along the *Camino Real*, *retablos* were made from different 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 manifested. 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* and *bultos*.

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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Web Resources

www.nmhistorymuseum.org/tesoros

www.palaceofthegovernors.org

www.nmhistorymuseum.org

State history museum collections, highlighting *bultos* and *retablos* from the exhibition *Tesoros de Devoción*.

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

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Palace^{of} the Governors

New Mexico History Museum

