LESSON 21: ARTS FOR SPIRITUAL INTERVENTION
Honoring Patron Saints with Retablos, Mexico

Fig. 4.3
Lesson Summary and Objectives

Students learn about the meanings of retablos and ex-votos in Mexico and discuss the significance of these to the individuals and families who use them in ritual practice. They create individual votive-inspired expressions of wishes and/or thanks. The lesson also includes a closer look at the representational imagery of Catholic saints and the impact such images may have in students’ lives. Students will

- "Read" and interpret retablos and ex-votos from Mexico through discussion and writing.
- Create retablo- and votive-like offerings.
- Discuss individuals’ beliefs about ancestors and family patron saints as intercessors with the divine.

Background Information

Small tin paintings known as retablos (literally, “behind the altar”) were often displayed in the homes of devout Catholics in Mexico to honor patron saints. Near the end of the nineteenth century, the increased availability of color lithographs and other inexpensive reproductions contributed to the decline of this tradition, but one form of retablo, the ex-voto, continues to be produced today by artists in a variety of media.

Ex-votos (from the Latin, meaning “according to a vow”) are offered to give thanks for an answered prayer. This testimonial, while a personal expression of gratitude, contributes to a public affirmation of belief since votive paintings are displayed in churches. There they testify to the efficacy of ritual as well as to the power of faith and the particular church or shrine. A dedication or description of the pictured event is typically written below the painting.
Toward the end of the nineteenth century, when demand for retablos was greatest, small factories were established where artists, both trained and untrained, worked to produce and reproduce the images. As some subjects were particularly desired, the artists turned out multiple copies of the same image or scene.
1. Petitions on View

Activity

Students will review images of four pieces from the *Transforming Destiny* section of the *Intersections: World Arts, Local Lives* exhibition. The students, working in pairs or small groups, should describe what they see on each *retablo* or ex-voto. All the paintings were offered as petitions or expressions of gratitude, and all incorporate elements of daily or religious life in Mexico. Students should take particular note of these elements. Students may use *Handout MEXICAN RETABLOS* (figures A-D) for this activity.

On the handout *figure A* shows two kneeling figures are praying to a black Christ. In the background four gunmen and an unarmed man and woman stand on a fairly modern street. What story do students think is being told here? Do they think that this ex-voto was painted as a prayer petition or to give thanks? They could present their interpretation orally or in written form. (*The inscription on this ex-voto relates the story of a man accused of “making false statements in the company of others” and rescued from the firing squad by the prayers of his wife and parents and the divine intervention of Jesus Christ.*)

*Figure B* on the handout shows the Virgin of Guadalupe, also known as Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico. People offer her devotion in recognition of her 1531 miraculous appearance to a converted Indian named Juan Diego on Tepeyac, the former site of a temple dedicated to the Aztec mother goddess Tonaatzin. Roses that stayed fresh and wet with dew were the sign of the miracle and invariably are painted with images of the Virgin. Could Catholic students share some of their church’s beliefs about saints? Are they aware of the patron saint of their community, city, or church? How are the patrons honored? Do they or their family seek help from saints, or do they recognize any saints for having performed a spiritual intervention of any kind?

San Geronimo, patron saint of philosophers and scholars, is the central image in *figure C*. Surrounding him are icons associated with him. Let students speculate on what parts of the painting represent these associated images. (*On most representations of San Geronimo there appear a trumpet, cross, lion, rock, book, writing implement, and skull.*) In a most frequently told story of the saint, he removes a thorn from a lion’s foot and in gratitude the lion serves as the saint’s...
guardian thereafter. Call attention to the human-like face the retablo painter has given the lion. Some informants believe that the human-faced lion represents a Mexican folk animal called a nagual. Students can look up the traditions that have continued to surround this creature since pre-colonial times.

Another frequent image in Mexico is that of the devil, appearing in figure D near the end of the bed on which a patient lies. Notice that the figure of an angel is much larger. Can students offer possible reasons for the difference in sizes? They have encountered the same differences in hierarchal scale in other pieces in the exhibition. Further reading will inform students about devil images in Mexican art and masking traditions.

2. Learning More about Devotional Paintings

Activity

Many of your students may have devotional paintings in their homes and may wish to share the meanings these hold to their families. Students can read more about devotional paintings or you may give some of the following information to stimulate further research.

Origins of the traditions

The tradition of offering a votive object to a god or a holy personage in thanks or petition dates back, in Europe, at least to the ancient Greeks. The Spanish brought the tradition to the Americas. Similar practices have been common in other parts of the world as well. Retablos with their images of saints served the church’s desire to disseminate Christianity. Ex-voto paintings are said to have developed out of the need to express problems and concerns of the villagers or townspeople.

Creativity among artists

Retablos emphasized certain attributes of the saints and were typically copies of other saint images. The imagery of ex-votos, however, was created in response to the expressed desires of the person ordering the painting; style and subject varied greatly.
Economic connections

The traditions of hand-painted ex-votos and retablos are in decline. Mass-produced chromolithographs of the saints are readily available and artists creating ex-votos today often utilize newer elements such as photographs and small statues in their works.

Today not all churches display ex-votos, and those that do attract pilgrims and ordinary tourists to view the pieces, thus affecting the economic status of the communities.

Artists painting scenes for ex-votos would often set the cost according to the client’s ability to pay and would charge more as they added more details to the paintings. The same held true for inclusion of elaborate features of dress and theatrical settings.

Appreciation of the form in the wider art world was enhanced by the interest of important Mexican artists including Diego Rivera who collected ex-votos, and Frida Kahlo who sometimes incorporated the images in her own paintings.

3. Portable and Personal
Activity

This art form is found throughout Latin America, though Mexico particularly is known for its use of tin as the painting surface. Well-known are the Peruvian retablos in the form of three-dimensional wooden boxes, typically with peaked roofs.

Students can create their own votive-like offerings. Have available a variety of materials including metal, wood, and canvas for the base and various collage materials to add to the painting. Using the Peruvian style retablo will lead students to shadow box structures with three-dimensional figures, perhaps made of clay. Whatever the style, have students begin with considerations of events that they are thankful for, or events that they hope to manage, and continue with the illustration of the event. Remember that ex-votos should have a narrative in the approximate bottom third of the piece. Expressions of wishes or thanks in poetic form would be appropriate. Perhaps incorporating a combination of English and Spanish in the narrative/poem is possible.
4. Sainted Views

On home altars, in the niches of small churches and ornate cathedrals, dangling from necklaces and automobile rear-view mirrors, in print, plaster, wood and metal, images of saints are ever-present. In many parts of Latin America a patron saint looks over each town and a specific day of the year is set aside for a celebration in his or her name. In Guatemala the celebration may last for a week, but on the saint’s day his or her figure is removed from the Catholic Church and paraded through the town. Like all saints, the Virgin of the Rosary (fig. A on Handout SANTOS FIGURES) shown in Art and Transformation, is called upon to answer prayers and to bestow good fortune. In another part of the world, the figure of San Jacinto (fig. B) held a place of honor in a colonial church in the Philippines.

Saintly representations in the United States are seen on two of the video presentations in Intersections: World Arts, Local Lives. In the introductory video Alicia Gaspar de Alba of UCLA’s Chicano/a Studies Department tells how individuals use the images as a way of connecting to their faith and summoning the spirits, and Ysamur Flores-Peña of Otis College of Art and Design talks about the nobility of altars with their representations of saints. He says that effective altars must strike a balance. They must not be uninspiring, nor “so aggressive as to instill fear. They must be powerful so as to instruct, and gentle so as to comfort.” In another Intersections video, entitled “Felix Lopez,” a santero carver, (carver of saint figures), speaks of revering saint figures as holy objects of devotion. To him, the act of carving a santo is like a form of prayer.

Activity

Many of your students will be very familiar with the saint as an icon and they will be able to share their experiences. Have they approached images to act as intercessors to make something happen? Have they prayed as a thank-you for an already-answered prayer, or as thanksgiving for a blessing received even though it was not requested? Do their families have patron saints, are there images in their churches after which the churches are named, or do they know of saints who look after their parents’ line of work and attend to their families’ needs?
Activity

If any students have altars in their home, they could tell about or share images from them. People of many backgrounds make use of amulets or talismans to bring good fortune, and some—regardless of faith—incorporate them in special boxes or displays, including altars. If suitable for your group, students can create a three-dimensional sculpture, *retablo* (as below), or altar incorporating items significant to their experiences and their aspirations.
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Useful Readings
Mulryan, Lenore Hoag
1996 *Nagual in the Garden.*
Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

Photograph Captions

**Handout MEXICAN RETABLOS**


C. *Retablo*. Mexico. Tin, paint. Date unknown. H: 36.4 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Anonymous Gift. X96.42.13, 14


**Handout SANTOS FIGURES**

B. San Jacinto. Philippines. 19th century. Wood, paint. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of Mr. Louis Resnick. X82.1541a,b
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Note to Teachers:
This lesson is part of the curricular materials developed to accompany the exhibition *Intersections: World Arts, Local Lives*. Although this and companion lessons are self-contained, each will be enhanced when used in conjunction with others in this resource. Addressing several lessons within each unit will facilitate the incorporation of the study of world arts and cultures into your curriculum.

The lesson is based on works in the last section of the exhibition called *Art and Transformation*. In this gallery works are introduced that served to make things happen. See “Unit Four—Art and Transformation” for an introductory statement on the unit, along with some provocative “Questions for Thought,” and suggestions that will inspire the students to relate the unit to their own lives.

Images of objects to be shown to students may be printed as handouts (from within each lesson), viewed online at the *Intersections* web link [http://collections.fowler.ucla.edu](http://collections.fowler.ucla.edu), or downloaded from the curriculum page on our website.

In this unit the topics and lessons are
- **Lesson 19: Memorials and Transcendence**: *El Arbol de la Muerte*, Mexico
- **Lesson 20: Arts for Spiritual Intervention**: To Seek Divine Assistance: *Emas*, Japan
- **Lesson 21: Arts for Spiritual Intervention**: Honoring Patron Saints with *Retablos*, Mexico
- **Lesson 22: Tradition as Innovation**: Apartheid’s Funeral, South Africa
- **Lesson 23: Tradition as Innovation**: *La Calavera don Quijote*, Mexico
Handout: SANTOS FIGURES

Unit 4

A

B

Fowler Museum at UCLA. Intersections Curriculum