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 high-ranking 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.
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
Make Your Own Retablo

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
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 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.

Bibliography


**CHILDREN’S BOOKS**


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 Carpenteros 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.
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.nmcdn.org/heritage/folk_arts/**  
Curriculum guide with bibliography, picture gallery and internet resources related to folk art of New Mexico.
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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