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MEXICAN EX-VOTOS



PRE-HISPANIC and colonial traditions meet and fuse on contemporary terms in Mexican folk painting. This humble overlapping, neither Spanish nor Indian, is an important source of Mexico's modern plastic language.

What usually passes for folk art is readily accessible on curio counters and in the open-air shops of Mexico City. Vivid colors, amusing shapes and attractive prices alike appeal to the traveler, who returns to his hotel hugging a painted pig.

Only the tainted fringe of the folk arts, however, reaches the tourist market. The creators of true folk art are the people, who are its consumers as well. The quality of the popular arts as a pastime and a product of leisure is scarcely endorsed by the native artist; a quota of art means the anguish of creation for its maker in Mexico as it does the world over.

The purpose of folk art may be as serious as the making of it. Amusing by our standards, in the eye of the initiate a rag doll or clay puppet may be an awesome instrument of witchcraft. A Posada print, that a museum curator appreciates gingerly, has sharpened *machetes* and cocked pistols for action. Comical in our estimate, a *retablo* may be intended by its creator to be the Jacob's ladder that will narrow the gap between the devout and God.

The output of folk artists is so varied as to be unclassifiable, so cheap as to be despised, so thrust under everyone's eyes as to become invisible. The esthetic instinct is perhaps the prime motive for the Mexican who has but a weak economic instinct, and it excludes any thought of art as a luxury because, for him, it is in truth a necessity. Art as the Mexican understands it pervades all activities of daily life: lovers melt the hearts of their beloved with self-portraits, bartenders hire muralists to beautify their premises and thus increase business, devotees bribe saints with ex-votos. Indeed, the Mexican need not have contact with an object

of luxury to experience esthetic delight. Much folk art that may not pass the test of dealer or museum nevertheless generates delight.

Anonymity veils the origin of much folk art and allows the sophisticate to make much of the product and little of the producer. But folk artists are not a whit more alike, nor less complex, than their fine arts colleagues. I will tell of three among those I knew in Mexico, whose only common denominator was art—a *pulqueria* painter, a potter, and a *sarape* weaver.

In the 1920s, Siqueiros and I were journeying together through Puebla. We admired the freshly painted sign of an inn, and, after asking for the address of the artist, went to pay him our respects. We found ourselves in a quiet, clean, cubical house and were received by a modest, ascetic, nut-brown Indian shuffling silently in *huaraches*. Siqueiros showed him a photograph of Masaccio's *St. Peter Curing the Sick*, without which he rarely stepped out at that time, and commissioned a free rendering of the masterpiece.

The painter gave the photograph an appreciative look and his face lighted, "You want a *capricho*," a caprice, his trade name for a picture free of the functional slant, architectural and commercial, which is the tavern-sign painter's usual lot. We left an advance and our treasured Alinari print with this muralist to the people, but neither Siqueiros nor I ever had occasion to return to fetch the panel that was ours, on which Italy and Mexico perhaps mingled more successfully than they do on the government walls we frescoed.

In Tonalá, a group of us visited Amado Galvan, the master potter and decorator, humble, quiet, polite, but with the impatience of the inspired artist who wishes to be left alone with his work and his vision. He let Edward Weston photograph his clay-incrusted hand spanking a spherical pot, newborn out of slimy clay, and allowed Rivera to



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sketch him squatting and painting his own brand of Indian designs on a jar, all five fingers tightly wrapped around the brush held vertically, Chinese-like—but also Aztec-like as depicted in the codices.

Leon Venado, a *sarape* maker from Texcoco, came to the city to take advantage of the tourist market, rigged his primitive loom in the rented entrance of an apartment house and started weaving. Soon he was friendly with the painters—swapped drawings, would sit evenings edgewise on a bed with his guitar on his knees and improvise *corridos* keyed to melancholy. Done in severe Indian taste, his *sarpes* displayed a splendid range of grays sharpened by a ground of velvet black shot with the lightnings of thin white streaks. To Northern customers insisting on more "Mexican" color schemes, he allowed only a minimum quota of imported aniline dyes. Soon he returned to his village and the civilization he understood and vented his nostalgia by painting watercolors with picturesque subject matter as did his city friends, but in reverse perspective. I have a picture of his which shows a German botanist resting in the

high grass after an exhausting pursuit of cacti: green sun-glasses, green tweeds, green felt hat and green tin box, emblems of his pursuit, are set off by a red beard and a red tie. Perhaps innocently, the artist mistook a knotted alpenstock for a monkey tail, poised and ready to curl around a tree.

The group of modern muralists gave only diffident admiration to the svelt intricacies of Galvan's arabesques and to Venado's abstract weaves. Bent on their own narrow pursuits, they felt closest to the social vindictiveness of the penny broadsides and the spiritual intensity of church ex-votos.

Retablos are painted thank offerings dedicated by the grateful recipient of a miraculous favor to the image of his devotion. As a rule, they are small oils on tin or temperas painted on cardboard and are piled high against the walls of the sanctuary around the venerated image, together with other testimonials of thanksgiving, such as crutches, daguerreotypes, trusses and those silver cutouts that represent the miraculously cured bodily part—arm, ear, heart, eye, shank or spleen.

Retablos have run their uninterrupted course since the days of the Conquest. A sculptured one, still in place at the entrance of the church of San Hipolito in Mexico City, shows the victorious Archangel Michael hovering over loot made up of Indian weapons, swords of tempered hard wood, obsidian axes, slings, nets, bows and arrows and the war drum, the *tonalamatl*, whose nocturnal beat gave many a restless night to Cortez.

The *retablo* was common in colonial times, in a near theocracy, and became even more vital as the War of Independence and succeeding wars and uprisings multiplied those close escapes from death that called for painted thanks. Despite the Marxist origin of the revolution of 1910-20, the *retablo* reached its spiritual culmination during this period. Dr. Atl, free-thinker, landscape painter and revolutionary leader, wrote as a disenchanting witness of the spread of the devotional *retablo*: "The revolutionist who fought church and clergy, by suggestion or because he did not know what he fought, remained deeply religious and deeply Catholic. After looting a church, he carried the little pictures to his barracks or his home, lighted a candle before

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them, offered a triduum, begged from them protection for his family."

Like the scaffold-sets of medieval mystery plays, the plastic dramas of the *retablos* are tiered vertically. Man is a kind of deep-air animal crawling on rock bottom, his face lifted to a stratosphere where the holy beings dwell. These in turn bend over the ledge of the dense pool, in search of their faithful. The pictures record cases where supplication produced recognition at moments when, to the handicap of being human, was added an extra burden of accident or crime.

Sanguine, booted and spurred, man is crushed under an upturned horse; yellow, naked and in bed, man dies; bronzed and mustachioed, man faces a shooting squad; thrown from a window, crushed between the flanges of a water wheel, stripped by bandits in the country, jailed by judges in the city, drafted at dawn for war, knifed by drunks in the dark, man claims redress to God.

Bountiful God answers man's plea under so many disguises as to emulate single-handed the crowds of godlings that jam Aztec cosmogony. At times He is the blond Child of Atocha, in a Fauntleroy suit, velvet hat with white

plumes, a beribboned shepherd's crook for a wand. Or an Ecce Homo, roped like a steer, flagellated, crowned with thorns, hair matted with sweat and beard with blood. Or the Señor of the Poison, crucified, coal-black, joints clothed in purple velvet spangled with gold sequins. Or a Lamb. Or a kerchief.

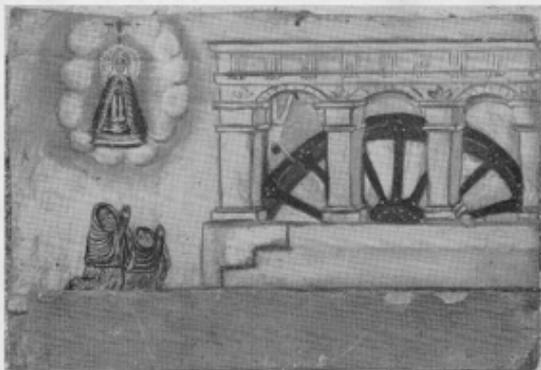
Mary too answers each and every call as she is bid: as a small pink doll nestling in a maguery, stiff in pyramidal brocades heavy with dangling silver ex-votos. Or in widow's weeds, crushing a damp handkerchief to her teeth, with seven pontards in her heart. Or wrapped in a blue starry mantle, her beige skin dark against the faded pink of her robe, with the moon underfoot.

Each *retablo* is a receipted bill for spiritual good or physical boons received, though some record less obvious gifts. One shows a bare room and a bed, and in it a dead crone, green and very stiff. Its dedication reads: "Mrs. . . . having left her village and come to town, wished to die. Her family offers this picture to give heartfelt thanks in her name that her wish was happily granted."

Before the contemporary Mexican renaissance, critics found *retablos* laughable. In an article published in 1922,

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in the magazine *Azulejos*, Diego Rivera was the first to speak respectfully of those little pictures. "The anguish of our people caused this strange flowering of painted ex-votos to rise slowly up against the walls of their churches. . . . Unexpected comparisons come to mind: trecento masters and those of the dawn of the quattrocento, Henri Rousseau the *douanier*, and in certain ways the Orient and the frescoes of Chichen-Itza. . . . There is infused knowledge for the asking if one is endowed with purity, faith in the reality of the marvelous, love and selflessness. . . ."

The interest of the muralists in folk painting was shown in other forms than words. The personages of the *retablos*, and even the terrestrial portion of their subject matter, reappear in many a mural painting intended, as were the smaller pictures, to underline the wants of the people. But more important than the borrowing of an anecdote was the absorption of the mood and style. The subject matter of folk painting is the folk, and this was also the subject of our socially conscious murals. Our respect for folk art corrected the penchant that painters often indulge—to look at the people from the outside and, moved by both propaganda and pity, to place them with the best of intentions amidst garbage cans or their Mexican equivalent. The folk and their artists have a better opinion of themselves. In the bare interiors represented in the *retablos*, the floor of beaten earth has been transformed into the luxurious red of brickwork. At the tip of the brush, necklaces and earrings are conjured up that, if they exist at all, are seldom redeemed from the pawnshop. The pallet one sleeps on, hugging the earth, has become a raised bed, often adorned with a canopy and curtains of colonial flavor that give away the dream substance of this piece of furniture. All men wear immaculate white, or brand new overalls; all women layers of petticoats, a throwback to the eighteenth century. Rags are strictly reserved for the villain—he who drains the bottle, paws the maiden or wipes the bloody knife.

Even in more general terms, folk painting taught us much in matters of mental discipline. Respectful of Paris, we were reluctant in the 1920s to defy its reigning artistic idols, originality and personality, and even less eager to commit the then cardinal sin of telling stories in pictures.

Folk painting epitomized a virtue never mentioned by the French critics, that of humility. The strength of folk painting came of the racial, rather than personal, characteristics that the folk artists were quite content to echo. Their popular achievement, based on anonymity and communal feeling, taught us that in art as elsewhere man may lose himself to find himself.

ILLUSTRATIONS 1, 16th century; 2, 1811; 3, 1894; 4, 1920; 5, ca. 1860; 6, no date; 7, 1864. CREDITS 1, courtesy Susana Nave; 2-6, courtesy Anke Bröner; 7, courtesy Taylor Museum, Colorado Springs.

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