



Holy Child of Atocha of Lagos/El Santo Niño de Atocha de Lagos,
anonymous, Mexico, May 4, 1877. Oil on tin, 10" x 7".
Collection, NMSU Art Gallery #1966.5.46. Donor: Mr. C. Andrew Sutherland.

El Favor de los Santos

By Carmella Padilla

*Light a candle.
Look to the heavens.
Pray for a miracle.*

No matter what religion or spiritual practice one subscribes to—or not—all are familiar responses to troubled times. When facing tragedy, illness, or other personal problems, our instincts often have us looking skyward for solace and solutions. If we can't find answers to our problems on the ground, we reason, we'll surely find them overhead, home to the gods and the goddesses, the saints and the supernatural, and all the other otherworldly entities whose powers are greater than our own.

As with much of modern culture, twenty-first-century spirituality reflects a greater global awareness, offering opportunities to engage in rituals of faith and prayer that reach across continents and cultures and enabling individuals to craft belief systems all their own. The tradition of votive offerings—a candle, artwork or a personal item offered to gain favor from a higher power—is also a cross-cultural, and often completely secular activity. Once purely religious votives are now part of the consumer grab bag of popular culture. For some,

lighting a get-out-of-debt-quick votive candle that promises deliverance from “debtor’s purgatory” may be as appealing as lighting a candle and a prayer for financial help at the local Catholic church.

The belief that life can improve with a little help from above has endured since prehistory. One of the most fervent votive art traditions took place in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Mexico with the popularization of tin *retablos*. These small-scale oil paintings of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints were powerful instruments of faith for Mexicans of all social classes who understood that divine intervention is a two-way street. *El favor de los santos*—the favor of the saints—required giving something back: faith. It was a compelling incentive for a lifetime of devotion.

El Favor de los Santos: The Retablo Collection of New Mexico State University, currently on display at the Palace of the Governors, explores the roots and evolution of this vibrant Mexican folk art form, which thrived for approximately seventy years from the 1830s to the early twentieth century. The show



Lord of the Hospital of Salamanca/El Señor del Hospital de Salamanca, anonymous, Mexico, April 18, 1899. Oil on tin, 10" x 7 1/4". Collection, NMSU Art Gallery #1966.5.57. Donor: Mr. C. Andrew Sutherland.

highlights retablos, ex-votos and related works from the university's collection of more than 1,700 pieces—the country's largest public collection of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mexican retablos. In examining the political, religious, artistic, and social factors that inspired the retablo tradition, the exhibit illustrates the potent intersection between religion and art in Mexico and beyond. As Elizabeth N.C. Zarur, exhibit co-curator and assistant professor of art at New Mexico State University, writes in the introduction to the book, *Art and Faith in Mexico: The Nineteenth-Century Retablo Tradition*, the art of the retablo "records the history of the peoples of Mexico, their art, devotions, and beliefs."

But the story of Mexican retablos is also a story of the world. It is but one of a continuum of stories stretching back through time and into tomorrow about the powerful draw of the divine.

Familiar Saints

The desire to influence human experience through divine intervention is as old as humanity's need to understand the world, and particularly, our place within it. From early Greek and European civilization to the Aztecs and other Pre-Columbian cultures, individuals strived to nurture a relationship with the gods and other powerful beings, using ritual offerings as symbols of devotion. In sixteenth-century Europe, the Council of Trent (1545–63) demanded participation of artists in the reform of the Catholic Church, prompting a flood of dramatic religious artworks intended to inspire faith and allegiance to the Church.

In 1519 Spanish conquistadors arrived in Mexico's Central Valley with a plan to Christianize the mighty Aztec empire. The Spaniards brought devotional books, prints, banners, illustrations, and three-dimensional images and other artworks to aid in the missionization process. The Aztecs already were deeply rooted in public and private devotional practices, creating sacred artworks honoring some 1,600 Aztec deities. Nonetheless, indigenous religious practices were systematically quashed, and by 1521, the Aztec civilization had fallen. The pantheon of Aztec deities was replaced by images of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and an extensive community of saints.

Over the next two centuries, established European traditions spread throughout Mexico. Grand mission churches were constructed and filled with ornate gold-leaf altar screens, sculptures and paintings of saints, and other religious items imported from throughout Europe. European-style paintings on canvas, and occasionally wood, depicted various images of saints, Jesus Christ, and the Virgin Mary and took an esteemed position upon wooden altar screens, known as *retablos*, that stood behind the church's main altar. These paintings were popular objects of veneration; rich and poor alike looked to the iconic images to address trials and tribulations of every kind.

Inspired by these elaborate paintings, some Mexican artists began creating small folk paintings of saints, or retablos, for use as votive offerings in village churches and homes. These early retablos were painted on canvas, wood, and, eventually, hand-hammered copper plates. But in the nineteenth century, with the importation of inexpensive sheets of tin from Europe, production of oil retablos on tin proliferated into a steady supply of imagery that the masses could afford. As accessibility to retablos increased, so did devotion.

The popularization of tin retablos illustrated the special role of the saints and other religious images in the daily lives of Catholics in New Spain. For the common people of Mexico, these images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the vast litany of saints were accessible for reasons that went beyond affordability. Placed on home altars, the images were no longer lofty symbols of an official (imposed) religion but were comfortable members of the family, dependable in good times and bad. From illness to marriage, gambling to birthing to natural disaster, their healing powers were both all-encompassing and site-specific.

Retablos were now central to people's private domestic worship and represented highly personal spiritual practices that transcended the Church. People formed intimate relationships with favorite religious figures. They talked to the saints. Confessed secrets. Prayed for miracles. They offered all their pain and passion to the heavens, and no priest was required.

The development of tin retablos as a popular, or "folk," art was thus coupled by the emergence of a new folk religion, a religion of the common people. While the Church remained the central place of worship, and the clergy the official intermediary between the congregation and God, the new folk religiosity was freer—a reflection, perhaps, of Mexico's independence from Spain in the early nineteenth century. This led to proliferation of another votive art form—the ex-voto—that expressed an even more intimate, revealing, and demonstrative relationship between the individual and the divine.

Prayers and Promises

A woman kneels on a bare wooden floor in an empty room, quiet and alone. Wrapped in a stormy blue *rebozo* (shawl), she looks to an image of a crucified Christ against a light blue sky. Her story, translated here from the Spanish is neatly printed below the Christ figure:

Porfiria Velis became seriously ill in her leg; not finding a useful remedy, she offered to the Lord of the Hospital of Salamanca that soon she would place a retablo in his church if he restored her health. It was granted and she presents this. April 18, 1899.

Miles away, a man in peasant dress kneels before another image of the crucified Christ uplifted in a circle of clouds. His sombrero before him, a candle in one hand, and a serape over his shoulder, the man floats before the image as a scene from his past plays out below: His story is told in looping Spanish letters. He is helpless and trapped, surrounded by uniformed men on horseback.



Lord of Saucito (Lord of Burgos of Saucito)/El Señor de Saucito (El Señor de Burgos de Saucito), anonymous, Mexico, 19th century. Oil on tin, 5" x 3 1/2". Collection, NMSU Art Gallery #1968.3.86. Donor: Dr. and Mrs. Andrew M. Babey.

On August during the year of 1866, they took him to Jalisco in bonds and Sabas Lima. . . . He invoked the Lord of Llanito because he was falsely accused of a crime and He reestablished his freedom and in thanksgiving for . . . this singular prodigy he presents this retablo to . . .

Still elsewhere, a man and his family stand in a large ship on the open sea, gesturing hopefully overhead. An image of a crucified Christ, encircled in flowers and clouds, is a peaceful presence above the narrative:

In the year 1897 Pedro Martines came with his family in a boat from Port Veracruz and it happened that around 11 at night on the tenth day of March of the same year, the ship was going to sink, so that Martines and his family seeing themselves in this difficulty called for help to the miraculous Image of the Lord of Llanito and it having come to nothing, he shows his gratitude with this.



Lord of Llanito/ El Señor del Llanito, anonymous, Mexico, August 10, 1886. Oil on tin, 10 1/4" x 7". Collection, NMSU Art Gallery #1966.5.35. Donor: Mr. C. Andrew Sutherland.

The stories above are true and at the heart of the Mexican ex-voto tradition. Like retablos, Mexican ex-votos were painted on tin as a personal devotion to a beloved saint or image of Christ or the Virgin. Ex-votos, however, were created expressly to commemorate a miraculous event. They served as a visual record of a promise kept by the faithful to publicize one's gratitude for the divine power and protection that was received in a time of need. More importantly, they emphasized that one's devotion *after* a miracle is just as important as all the prayers before.

The Latin word *ex-voto*, "from a vow," describes the pact between the faithful and the religious figure that led to creation of the work. The pact is made at a time of illness, danger, or other tragedy, when an individual appeals for divine intervention and vows to make a public offering in return. When help is granted, the vow is fulfilled in the form of an original artwork that recounts the event, at once testifying to the miracle and to the deep piety of the person saved. In a final act of devotion, the ex-voto is prominently posted in a church or other sacred place for all to see—and believe.

In the sixteenth century, the Mexican ex-voto tradition was confined to wealthy patrons who commissioned elaborate ex-votos on canvas. Similar ex-voto traditions, in various mediums, also were common in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, as well as in Brazil and throughout Latin America. But with the spread of tin retablos in the early nineteenth century, ex-voto practices broadened among the classes as commoners began to commission artists to create small-scale works on

tin to place at village churches and other sacred sites. As with traditional tin retablos, ex-votos were created largely by self-taught, anonymous artists who worked in a particular village or near a popular pilgrimage site. These artists, most of whom left their works unsigned, created ex-votos on demand. Like village scribes, they listened carefully to detailed accounts of individual miracles, then combined images and words to recreate the miraculous scene.

In the essay "Powerful Images: Mexican Ex-Votos" from the book *Art and Faith in Mexico: The Nineteenth-Century Retablo Tradition*, Elin Luque and Michele M. Beltrán describe the artist's role: "The retablo-maker became a kind of intermediary between the donor and the votive offering, adding immediacy to the testimony and the gratitude expressed." Indeed, the artist's skill as an interpreter who could simultaneously record the event visually and in written form was perhaps more important to patrons than the level of artistry. Luque and Beltrán compare an ex-voto artist's straightforward style to the "objectivity of television and the newspapers." The artist was an essential part of the record, yet somewhat removed.

Ex-voto artists followed a fairly standard compositional formula that divides the work into three horizontal sections: the upper sacred space, where the divinity resides; the middle earthly space, where the miracle takes place; and the lower, handwritten-narrative space. While this direct approach often produced a flat, distorted perspective, an individual artist's style and skill in organizing elements of color, light, and space resulted in works that range from simple to sophisticated.

Holy Child of Atolinga/El Santo Niño de Atolinga, Gerónimo de León, Totatiche, Jalisco, Mexico, 1893. Oil on tin, 7" x 9 3/4".
Collection, International Folk Art Foundation in the Museum of International Folk Art.
Purchase funding provided by Laura and Daniel Boeckman.



More than artistry, the unique aesthetic qualities of ex-votos emphasize their important storytelling role. The story is what draws the viewer in: tales of illness, family strife, imprisonment, travel, and violence are among the more common themes. Through emotional, often graphic depictions, ex-voto artists communicated life's most dramatic events. Consider these told through ex-votos in the New Mexico State University Collection:

Estanislado Diaz being gravely ill of incurable leprosy was cured.

Attacked by an infantile paralysis, the grandchild of Esther Hernandez was given a new chance at life.

Don Juan Garcia, whom they seized...and then threw into the army, was freed.

Praying that her infant be born healthy, because her other infants had been born dead, Tesesa Cobian gave birth to a baby girl, who was named María.

A Geographical Record of Faith

Ex-votos provided unique insight into the everyday lives of Mexicans. Artists gave revealing clues about the faithful's household, and even social standing, through depictions of interiors, architecture, and styles of dress.

One artist who did so was Gerónimo de León of Totatiche, Jalisco, one of the few nineteenth-century ex-voto artists who

occasionally signed his work. Though self-taught, he is best known for a distinctive painterly style that highlights his subjects' facial features as well as exquisite details of their clothing and textiles. "He specialized in textiles, including skirts, *rebozos*, *serapes*, and bed and floor coverings," said Barbara Mauldin, curator of Latin American folk art at the Museum of International Folk Art. "His fine detail work tells us a lot about regional textiles." De León's lush landscapes also give a feel for the villages near his home where he painted, including Temastián, Actepulco, and Santa Rita in Jalisco; and Atolinga, Zacatecas.

Two ex-votos by de León from the collection of the Museum of International Folk Art honor miracles performed by the Santo Niño (Holy Child) in the village of Atolinga, Zacatecas. De León's sophisticated painting style and intriguing prose engage the viewer with two exciting tales of tragedy and triumph.

The first ex-voto, dated June 1893, is the story of a seven-year-old boy who is debilitated by stomach pain, then cured by the intercession of Santo Niño. The second piece, circa 1900, depicts a peasant couple praying to the Santo Niño, who floats on a pillow of clouds above. This narrative recounts the couple's interesting troubles:

I, María Ines Abalos, resident of the Rancho de la Mesa Gonzales [near] Totateche had the disgrace of being in concubinage for something like three years with my brother-in-law and we asked the Santo Niño to liberate us from this state and with the risk of losing my soul and at the side of my brother-in-law we agreed to marry one another in the church. We are grateful for this great miracle.
María Ines Abalos.



Holy Child of Atolinga/El Santo Niño de Atolinga, Gerónimo de León, Totatiche, Jalisco, Mexico, c. 1900. Oil on tin, 7" x 9 3/4". Collection, International Folk Art Foundation in the Museum of International Folk Art. Partial purchase funding provided by Judith Espinar.

Like other ex-voto painters, de León's work focused on saints popular in the areas he worked. "De León often worked outside of his village at surrounding ranches, but many people came to his house to request specific images," Mauldin said.

*In a final act of devotion,
the ex-voto is prominently posted
for all to see – and believe.*

He produced more than 100 ex-votos dedicated to El Señor de Los Rayos (Lord of the Thunderbolts), a depiction of Christ, many of which still hang in his village church in Temastlán. Santiago de Matamoros, Santo Niño, and Santa Rita de Cascia were other common de León images.

Throughout central Mexico, other centers of worship were represented by popular images. Among these were San Juan de los Lagos (St. John of the Lakes) in Aguascalientes; Santo Niño

de Atocha (the Holy Child of Atocha) in Plateros, Zacatecas; El Señor del Hospital (Lord of the Hospital) in Salamanca, Guanajuato; and Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe in Mexico City. Their walls and altars literally layered with ex-votos, churches at these sites and elsewhere were living testaments to the culture's deep, abiding faith.

Tey Marianna Nunn, director and chief curator of the Visual Arts Program at the National Hispanic Cultural Center, in Albuquerque, described the proliferation of ex-votos in particular areas as "a geographical record of faith" that was perpetuated by the desire for miracles in daily life.

"The saturation of ex-votos in certain areas showed that, when a miracle happened to one individual or family, it was a big deal for everyone," said Nunn. "Everybody wanted to be part of the story. The individual devotion became a shared devotion. This helped popularize the image and increased visibility of the pilgrimage site."

On the northern frontier of New Mexico, a strong nineteenth-century center of religious art, tin ex-votos were not as central to residents' devotions as wood retablos and *bultos* (religious sculptures). But the church at the village of Chimayó, the Santuario de Chimayó, north of Santa Fe, has been a popular pilgrimage site since the early nineteenth century, luring faithful followers who seek healing in a handful of the chapel's legendary holy dirt. In a narrow side room adja-

cent to the central nave, a strong votive offering tradition honoring Santo Niño de Atocha is expressed today through powerful testimonials to miracles that resulted from the saint's intercession. Humble handmade ex-votos on cardboard, featuring photographs with handwritten text, mix with grateful letters to the Santo Niño, recounting stories of hopelessness and healing. Wheelchairs, crutches and other medical implements also hang there. They need no words to explain them.

Miracles in Unexpected Places

Tin retablo production in Mexico began to decline with the importation of commercial European chromolithographic images of saints and other religious icons by the end of the nineteenth century. Still, perhaps because of their highly personal nature and a variety of timely themes, ex-votos continued to be made into the mid-twentieth century. Several such ex-votos are in the collection of the Museum of International Folk Art, and they provide a window into the period:

One work, dated 1934, depicts a worker's demonstration on a village plaza, where Santo Niño de Atocha oversees the potentially dangerous scene.

Another, circa 1940, depicts a horrific incident of domestic violence as a man threatens a woman with a hammer, until witnesses' prayers prompt Santiago de Matamoros to intervene.

Santo Niño de Atocha appears again in a 1978 piece, this time in a hospital overlooking a modern surgical scene.

More contemporary manifestations of ex-votos also appeared. Tey Mariana Nunn of the National Hispanic Cultural Center cites acclaimed painter Frida Kahlo, whose works, Nunn says, reflect the artist's "intentional reclamation of popular arts." Kahlo often included descriptive narrative panels in her paintings to identify or describe a particular scene. Her 1939 work *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale* depicts a disturbing scene, further explained by a narrow band of Kahlo's handwritten script about Hale's plunge from a high window of her Hampshire House apartment.

Today, the production of painted tin ex-votos in Mexico has decreased, with the exception of generic images made for the tourist trade. Meanwhile, eBay and other retail venues feature original nineteenth- and twentieth-century ex-votos as desirable—and often expensive—collectables. Fewer traditional tin



Holy Child of Atocha/El Santo Niño de Atocha, anonymous, Mexico, 1934. Oil on tin, 14" x 20 1/4". Collection, Museum of International Folk Art, Department of Cultural Affairs. Gift of Peter P. Cecere.

ex-votos are found inside today's Mexican churches, replaced by more modern votive offerings, including photographs and photocopies, computer-generated imagery, and other personal effects. The artist-interpreters who once recorded hundreds of thousands of miracles across Mexico have been rendered nearly obsolete.

But according to Nunn, a new breed of votive artist has emerged. Though their contemporary creations may not address traditional topics, their work reflects fresh perspectives on spirituality and tackles equally relevant themes. Addressing issues from 9–11 to immigration to the Iraq war, said Nunn, these works "reflect the same spirit of traditional ex-votos."

In that spirit, believers of all stripes continue to hope for miracles in the most unexpected places. And, as others have for centuries, they continue to search for divine favor from above. Times may have changed, but the need to commemorate, communicate, and connect remains. ■



Carmella Padilla is a freelance writer living in Santa Fe. Her books include *Conexiones: Connections in Spanish Colonial Art; The Chile Chronicles: Tales of a New Mexico Harvest*, and *Low 'N Slow: Lowriding in New Mexico*. She currently is working on a book about El Rancho de los Golondrinas, a living history museum south of Santa Fe, to be published next year by the Museum of New Mexico Press. Photo by Athi Maran Magadi.