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## Review Essay

ELIZABETH NETTO CALIL ZARUR AND CHARLES MUIR LOVELL, *ART AND FAITH IN MEXICO: THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY RETABLO TRADITION* AND MARY MONTAÑO, *TRADICIONES NUEVOMEXICANAS: HISPANO ARTS AND CULTURE OF NEW MEXICO*

Gloria Fraser Giffords

Everyone with an interest in expressions of Hispanic art and culture—those generated in Mexico and in those parts of the United States once the territory of Spain and, later, Mexico—welcomes publications that elucidate and enhance the understanding of those expressions. Some books achieve this objective better than others. Recently, two books had such an opportunity.

The University Art Gallery of New Mexico State University, Las Cruces (NMSU), is home to a collection of more than seventeen hundred *retablos santos* and *retablos ex-votos* (mostly nineteenth-century Mexican images of saints and ex-votos painted on tinplate), donated by a number of local and

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*Art and Faith in Mexico: The Nineteenth-Century Retablo Tradition*, edited by Elizabeth Netto Calil Zarur and Charles Muir Lovell (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001. 360 pp. 125 color plates, 64 halftones, glossary, appendixes, index. \$50.00 cloth, ISBN 0-8263-2323-1, \$29.95 paper, ISBN 0-8263-2324-3). *Tradiciones Nuevomexicanas: Hispano Arts and Culture of New Mexico*, by Mary Montaña (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001. viii + 374 pp. 91 color plates, 56 halftones, glossaries, bibliographies, index. \$50.00 cloth, ISBN 0-8263-2136-4, \$29.95 paper, ISBN 0-8263-2137-2). Gloria Fraser Giffords is a historian of Latin American art and has worked as an independent art conservator since 1970 specializing in oil paintings and polychrome wooden statuary. She has written on religious and secular arts of Latin America and northern New Spain, their history, significance, and conservation. Fraser Giffords has served as a guest curator for several exhibits on Mexican folk *retablos* and is a Fellow at the American Institute for Conservation.

El Paso dealers and collectors over the last three decades. The size of the collection — “the largest collection of nineteenth- to twentieth-century Mexican tin retablos in any U.S. museum” (p. 7) — and the enthusiasm of the art gallery’s staff fueled support for an exhibition of the collection’s nineteenth-century retablos (from November 1999 to February 2000) and the publication of *Art and Faith in Mexico*, which served as its catalogue.

The book’s color plates and halftones illustrate each of the 120 retablos and 40 ex-votos in the exhibition, representations inspiring the *retablos santos*, and parts of the exhibition installation at the University Art Gallery. Preceding the catalogue proper are a preface by exhibition cocurator Charles Muir Lovell, director of the University Art Gallery, and nine brief essays on retablos by art scholars and experts from both Mexico and the United States. Lead essayist and exhibition cocurator Elizabeth N. C. Zarur has also provided concluding essays after the formal catalogue and after each of the first three appendixes. Conservator Silvia Marinas-Felinera offers notes on the conservation of the exhibition pieces in the fourth appendix.

Regrettably, in light of the questionable quality of many exhibition pieces and the unevenness of the exhibition as a whole, neither the exhibition nor the book that serves as its catalogue can be considered “the most comprehensive . . . on the subject of the Mexican tin retablo [and ex-voto] to date” (p. 7), as cocurator Lovell maintains. There have been several tinplate retablo and ex-voto exhibitions in Mexico and the United States and several books on such retablos and ex-votos that might more accurately be called “comprehensive.” These works include Fernando Juárez-Frías’s 1991 retablo exhibition in Zacatecas, captured in the photographs of his book *Retablos populares mexicanos: Iconografía religiosa del siglo XIX* (1991), and the 1995 ex-voto exhibition in Mexico City mounted by Centro Cultural/Arte Contemporáneo and its accompanying highly informative catalogue (1995). Indeed, by featuring multiple representations of images such as the Sorrowful Mother (fourteen pieces) and Our Lady of Refuge (sixteen pieces) — poorly painted and maintained examples at that — and by including few or none of other historically important images, neither the book *Art and Faith in Mexico* nor the exhibition upon which it is based serves collectors or general readers well.

In her introduction, Zarur provides a succinct overview of the book’s essays, placing tinplate retablos and ex-votos in their cultural and historical contexts. Describing the common physical characteristics of pieces belonging to the University Art Gallery retablo and ex-voto collection, she focuses

on one of the most popular retablo images, *Our Lady of Refuge*. Ramón A. Gutiérrez's essay, "Sacred Retablos: Objects That Conjoin Time and Space," explains how retablos and ex-votos conjoin "objects, space, and time . . . the living and the dead, the natural and the supernatural, the human and the divine," bringing them "into unison, thereby demarcating the sacred from the profane" (p. 31). Marcus B. Burke's essay highlights the peculiarly Mexican elements of this art form and its iconography in his general review, "On the Spanish Origins of Mexican Retablos."

Claire Farago considers "the crucial role of prints in popular religious art produced in northern Mexico and New Mexico" (p. 47) in her essay, "Prints and the Pauper: Artifice, Religion, and Free Enterprise in Popular Sacred Art." She emphasizes the importance of commerce in dispersing popular religious themes and motifs. Solange Albero, in "Retablos and Popular Religion in Nineteenth-Century Mexico," points out how little we know of the "religious usages among the common people" of nineteenth-century Mexico and calls for serious and thorough historical research in this area. In "Powerful Images: Mexican Ex-Votos," Elin Luque and Michele Beltrán present a historically accurate, evocative account of their subject from both an academic and a cultural perspective, with specific iconographic notes on most of the exhibition's ex-votos.

Jacinto Quirate clearly and thoroughly explores the origin and significance of a particular iconographic symbol, the "Powerful Hand," in his essay "Los Cinco Señores and La Mano Poderosa: An Iconographic Study." Focusing on three popular retablo images in "Sermons of the Religious Orders and Retablo Art in Mexico," Manuel Olmón Nolasco connects the popularity of the Child of Atocha and *Our Lady of Refuge* with that of their devotional practices in the areas where the retablos were painted. Felipe Solís, in "Archaeological Testimonies of Popular Religion in the Mexican World," draws an implicit parallel between the proliferation of Aztec clay figurines and of tinsplate retablos in pre-Conquest and nineteenth-century central Mexico, respectively, as evidence of widespread religious devotion among the people of that region.

Retablo aficionados, students, and collectors expecting specific, reliable information will be disappointed by *Art and Faith in Mexico*. Inaccuracies, specious generalizations, and serious omissions abound. For example, in his preface, Lovell explains the demise of the tinsplate retablo toward the end of the nineteenth century as follows: "The Mexican retablo artists could not produce devotional paintings at such a low cost [as that of chromolithographs],

which subsequently greatly diminished their production” (p. 13). In fact, we have no record of any nineteenth-century retablo artist speaking (or writing) to this point. Nor have we any idea of how much retablos or chromolithographs sold for in nineteenth-century Mexico. Most likely, chromos (mass-produced on paper) did cost more than retablos (hand-painted on tinfoil). Chromos did displace retablos by the early twentieth century, perhaps for their perceived modernness, novelty, and greater trueness to the original paintings and sculptures that served as retablo models as much as for their lower price. In the absence of documentary evidence we can only speculate, not confidently assert. Lovell continues: “Nevertheless, the retablo tradition has continued in modern times in the form of calendars, holy cards, prints, home altars, and the proliferation of religious trinkets sold in markets near churches and shrines throughout Mexico and the Latino United States” (p. 13). One wonders just what “retablo tradition” he is referring to. By expanding the term to include virtually all popular religious images, does he mean to abandon the narrower, established sense of the term used by the other essayists in the book and by those (himself included) who mounted and officially described the exhibition?

In her introductory essay, Zarur explains that the exhibition’s retablos of Our Lady of Refuge range stylistically “from Byzantine prototypes (fig. 45), to baroque expressions (fig. 46), to classical derivation (fig. 53), to popular images (fig. 57), to folk representations (fig. 52)” (p. 21). Yet we know that the original image copied for the retablo shown in figure 45 (p. 156) was an early-eighteenth-century Italian baroque painting. In the absence of any evidence to support such a claim, implying that Byzantine religious images could have influenced a group of nineteenth-century Mexican artists living mainly in the Bajío strains credulity to the breaking point. A particularly unfortunate inclusion in both the exhibition and catalogue is the chromolithographic image of the Virgin of Perpetual Help, which faces the title page of Claire Farago’s essay (p. 46) and appears in the catalogue proper (figure 182, p. 298). This specific representation of the Virgin Mary was introduced by the Redemptorist Brothers in the United States in the late nineteenth century and was *never* reproduced in any extant Mexican folk retablo.

None of the essayists have attempted to establish the exhibition’s *retablos santos* in actual time or space, or dealt with authorship, numbers produced, demographics, or socioeconomic factors. None discusses the mechanics involved in the production of oil paintings on tinfoil that was concentrated largely in nineteenth-century central Mexico—essential information

of great interest to collectors, curators, and students of nineteenth-century Mexican religious folk art. Indeed, Nolasco suggests that the popularity of the Child of Atocha theme was almost solely the result of the Dominicans' zealous promotion of the Child of Atocha devotion a century before the figure's establishment (p. 92), while he attributes the popularity of the Virgin of Refuge theme simply to the Virgin Mary's widespread appeal. At the very least, his oblique explanations oversimplify the use of Mother and Godchild themes in tin retablo production. Nolasco ignores both the significance of the trade corridors that would bring the devotion of the Child of Atocha into the far northern reaches of Spain's former territories, and the swiftly diminishing presence of Dominicans after Mexican independence. His essay fails to touch on, much less discuss, either the role played by the established proximity of retablo artists to devotional sites for the two images or the history and nature of the NMSU retablo collection.

A large number of individuals from Mexico and the United States expended a great deal of time and effort to mount the NMSU exhibition. Collectors and aficionados of Mexican folk retablos will want a copy of *Art and Faith in Mexico* for its excellently printed color plates. It is a shame, however, that an important opportunity was missed to showcase such an appealing art form with a more representative exhibition and a more thoughtful, substantive catalogue.

Where *Art and Faith* circles around its single subject, *Tradiciones Nuevomexicanas* deals with many subjects, which the author carefully designed and structured to create a much more cohesive work. In 1994, the Southwest Hispanic Arts Curriculum Symposium, the Hispanic Steering Committee (under the leadership of Dean Thomas A. Dodson of the College of Fine Arts), and like-minded individuals outside these organizations joined forces to integrate Hispanic materials into a predominantly Anglo-based arts curriculum at the University of New Mexico (UNM). With support from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), Helen Lucero, director of visual arts at the National Hispanic Cultural Center, and Susan Patrick, professor of musicology and former associate dean of the College of Fine Arts at UNM developed a 200-level course. For several semesters they team-taught a survey of Hispanic Arts and Culture with guest lectures by recognized authorities. When Lucero could find no single book in print that covered all the material for the new course, she proposed that the Hispanic Steering Committee commission one. The result is *Tradiciones Nuevomexicanas*, an excellent

overview and sound primer for students and those interested in traditional New Mexican arts, crafts, and culture.

In the course of her research, author Mary Montaña encountered interesting and pertinent bits of knowledge that “never got beyond the scholarly journals and papers to those who would most benefit from them—*la gente*”; her endeavor to distill these “into a narrative that is both accessible and enjoyable [to] readers of all backgrounds” is eminently successful (p. vii).

*Tradiciones* begins with a historical overview then proceeds to religious art; religious and secular celebrations; secular arts (including architecture, textiles, metal work and jewelry, and straw appliqué); secular and religious music through social dance, food, and medicine; and finally literature and theater. Each chapter is followed by its own chronology, glossary, and bibliography, with videography, discography, and list of musical archival collections included where pertinent. The glossaries contain many entries specific to New Mexico. The bibliographies include works that encourage Nuevomexicano readers to search out and understand the historical antecedents and contemporary importance of their culture.

Recent textbooks designed to survey the national cultures of Spain, Mexico, and other Latin America countries have been few and, for the most part, far narrower in scope than *Tradiciones*, which manages to cover practically all aspects of Nuevomexicano culture. Taking a holistic approach, the book is well arranged, engaging, and easy to read; indeed, I found it difficult to put down. By sprinkling sidebars throughout to offer readers special focus, added insights into a chapter’s topics, and even humor, Montaña provides welcome variety without interrupting the flow of her main text. Illustrations are well balanced between black and white historical photographs, drawings, and prints on the one hand, and contemporary color photographs on the other. The judicious use of color throughout the book provides excitement and invites readers to read on. As is true of most University of New Mexico Press publications, book design, printing, and color work are excellent.

The author begins each chapter with a brief overview of historical and contemporary traditions (concentrating on those specific to New Mexico) and reactions to tourism and commerce, such as cultural invention. Tying cultural traditions to current, observable objects and practices, she plunges readers into a living, constantly evolving culture, rich in texture, color, and flavor and steeped in sometimes conflicting desires between preserving traditions and creating objects and spectacles for tourist consumption.

In her acknowledgments, Montañó tells us that although her academic and personal focus is music, in reawakening to her cultural and familial past she has become an advocate for all of the *tradiciones nuevomexicanas*. In chapters on topics other than music, she, for the most part, makes fine use of other scholars, professional visual and performing artists, and practitioners of various crafts, food preparation, and healing arts to achieve an informed, well-rounded treatment. On occasion, however, she includes without attribution statements outside her area of expertise. For instance, she comments that the retablo of La Castrense, now located in the Church of Cristo Rey, “influenced the makers of gesso reliefs, including Laguna Santero and, through him, Molleno and other nineteenth-century artisans” (p. 33). Since this claim is not accompanied with a citation, readers are left unsure as to its source and accuracy.

For Montañó *tradiciones nuevomexicanas* refers only to the transplanted culture of Hispanic individuals: “The term ‘Nuevomexicano’ is used throughout the text to indicate the Hispanos of New Mexico” (p. vii). She therefore relegates indigenous cultures to passing mentions of their marauding habits (pp. 5, 8, 10) and their tenuous association with a few traditional dances (p. 172). Although she acknowledges that Anglos, as organizers of museums and preservation societies, as collectors, and as educators in the numerous vocational education training schools during the 1930s, have made valuable contributions to the perpetuation, revitalization, and dissemination of Hispanic arts and crafts, *Tradiciones* is essentially written for those interested in Hispanic contributions to New Mexican culture. It is common knowledge that most native Hispanos of New Mexico take umbrage at being called “Mexican-Americans” (many older individuals prefer instead to be called “Hispano-Americans”), explaining that, even though the province of Nuevo México was abandoned by the Spanish at Mexico’s independence, it was never entirely under Mexican control. Montañó leads readers to assume that these Hispano descendants, as a group, somehow managed to maintain their Spanish ethnic and cultural purity. Indeed, she makes a determined and impressive effort to minimize the role of other ethnic and cultural influences in New Mexico. In reality, however, these influences have played a significant role from the earliest years of Spanish rule. The mixing of Hispanic with indigenous blood most likely began with the first Spanish incursion into New Mexico in the sixteenth century. Contact and intermarriage with indigenous peoples—and with peoples of many other ethnic groups—continue to this day. Moreover, since the early twentieth century, the

“traditional” art objects of Nuevomexicano craftpersons have evolved far beyond their original forms and purposes to meet largely Anglo, or in any event non-Hispano, market needs and expectations.

Chapter 2, “Artes del Espíritu: Religious Arts,” skillfully handles this issue as it relates to some of the most popular, appealing, and highly touted New Mexican art objects—carved and painted religious images. Declaring themselves *santeros* and (since the 1970s) *santeras*, Nuevomexicano artists have begun producing images of saints both for collectors and for public and private devotion. Unfortunately, many of these productions are retrograde. Although contemporary artists have been exposed all their lives to the modern means of portraying imagery and have sometimes attended university classes in the practice and appreciation of art, many find it impossible to acknowledge that they simply cannot approach the subject with the same sensibilities as their traditional forebears. In striving to adhere to tradition rather than responding to any genuine, immediate creative stimulus, whether internal or external, many have produced carvings and paintings that are little more than lifeless copies of traditional pieces, masquerading their uninspired ineptness as naive artistry. Montaña’s chapter addresses both the “Traditionalists,” who claim to draw inspiration as well as techniques from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century examples, and the “Innovators,” who use traditional techniques in a nontraditional manner.

Perhaps more than any other, chapter 3, “Fiestas y Rituales: Religious and Secular Celebrations,” draws readers into the sense of cultural continuity that pervades contemporary New Mexico. “The idea that Nuevomexicano traditions have survived as a result of cultural resistance to the presence and traditions of the Anglo culture,” Montaña writes, “is most evident in the *fiesta* and *entriega*” (p. 63). The author discusses the celebrations by season, including both traditional (stemming from the sixteenth century) and invented celebrations (from the twentieth century). Although “the old traditions are no competition for the appeal of mass media and entertainment” and “certain traditions are quickly disappearing” (p. 63), “invented celebrations provide concentrated educational and cultural discovery experiences” (p. 69), which, she implies, enjoy considerable popularity among Nuevomexicanos of different generations, especially the young. A compelling example of an older tradition revitalized through modern embellishments is the “Noche Buena.” A Christmas Eve observance in rural communities dating back to colonial Spain, Noche Buena in the late twentieth century has moved out of homes and churches to the gravesites of loved ones, which

family members outline in the shape of hearts or crosses with luminarias, and decorate with poinsettias and sometimes even small Christmas trees (pp. 79–80).

Chapter 8, “El Arte de la Palabra: Language Arts,” is exceptionally rich, embracing the written and spoken word, both religious and secular. Whether oral or written, poetry and literature were read or acted out in New Mexico to entertain but also to counsel and teach. Poetry and literature continue to perform this function, but they are now also used—especially the everyday spoken word, a primary component of cultural identity—to reinforce traditions specific to Nuevomexicanos.

Montaño and the University of New Mexico Press are to be complimented for producing this book, which makes ideal reading for students and others interested in a wide-ranging survey of New Mexican cultural history.

A comparison between these two books reveals significant differences. In *Art and Faith in Mexico*, an opportunity is lost to provide substantive and useful information. The book’s lack of focus and substitution of a narrow but deep expertise for a shotgun approach to a single topic renders it ineffective. In *Tradiciones Nuevomexicanas*, the author handles a much wider range of subjects and manages to put together a succinct and useful text. The key to success or failure might well rest at the beginnings of both of these ambitious projects and in the editing skills of the responsible individuals. *Tradiciones Nuevomexicanas* reflects a genuine love and interest for various topics while *Art and Faith in Mexico* is like someone trying to paint a small religious painting with a plaster’s brush.