

# FROM MEXICANS WHO EMIGRATED, WORKS OF ART THAT ILLUSTRATE FAITH PAINTINGS SHOW THE TRIALS OF THOSE WHO LEFT HOME FOR THE U.S.

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## **Body**

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In 1908, Gumercindo Ramirez, a recent Mexican immigrant to the United States, fell off a railroad car. Eleven years later, another newcomer, Matias Lara, got lost wandering the streets of Chicago.

Both eventually emerged from their travails safe and sound - and offered up their thanks in the form of retablos, simple votive paintings on tin. Their expressions of religious faith are on view at the University of Pennsylvania Museum in a show called "Miracles on the Border: Folk Paintings of Mexican Migrants to the United States."

This is a modest show of 50 colorful 20th-century retablos, some painted by immigrants or family members, others by commissioned folk artists. The latter, as one would expect, tend to be more sophisticated. All were collected by Douglas Massey, the Dorothy Swaine Thomas Professor of Sociology at Penn, and Jorge Durand, a visiting professor at Penn's Population Studies Center.

The retablos have a conventional form: In general, they combine a short Spanish-language text with a rendering of both the real-life incident that inspired the retablo and of the Virgin Mary, a crucified Christ or a particular saint. (Ramirez's retablo, for example, includes a picture of him lying on the railroad tracks.) In some retablos, the subjects of the presumed miracle are pictured on their knees, praying.

This nicely laid-out exhibition provides both a brief history of retablos and English translations of the texts, which most commonly celebrate recoveries from illness, survival of accidents, and successful border crossings. They include the testimony of both legal and illegal immigrants, and attest to the hopes and anxieties of both groups.

Retablos can be admired as folk art - although, displayed as a group, they seem repetitive and without great aesthetic interest. They also can serve as sociological documents, as they have for Massey and Durand. The two have written a book on retablos by immigrants, also called *Miracles on the Border* (1995, University of Arizona Press).

The term retablos has a significant history that long predates Mexican immigration to this country. It was first used to describe paintings and sculpture placed behind the altars of European churches in the early Middle Ages. In Mexico, in the 17th century, retablos fused both European and native traditions.

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The introduction of inexpensive tinplate made retablos into a popular Mexican art form, customarily posted on the walls of Mexican Catholic churches. As we learn in "Miracles on the Border," their bright colors and simplified forms influenced leading Mexican artists, including Diego Rivera and his wife, Frida Kahlo.

In a telephone interview, Durand said that about five years ago he and Massey stumbled on a large number of retablos in the Mexican town of San Juan de los Lagos that reflected the difficulties encountered by immigrants.

"We began to think that this is a new perspective on the problem of immigration because this is the perspective of the migrant," Durand said. In all, he and Massey have collected about 80 retablos, representing various periods of migration during this century.

Many immigrants, having left with high hopes, eventually returned to Mexico. Some retablos commissioned by the parents of immigrants, and on view in this exhibition, give thanks for this turn of events. Another type expresses the immigrants' gratitude for surviving the rigors of life in America, from car crashes to military service.

All, in their way, evoke the polarities of a particular immigrant sensibility - an idealism and thirst for change that coexist with a religious traditionalism. Yoked together, they produce the unique genre of immigrant retablos.

IF YOU GO

\* "Miracles on the Border: Folk Paintings of Mexican Migrants to the United States" is on view at the University of Pennsylvania Museum, 33d and Spruce Streets, through July 8. Hours are Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and Sundays, 1 to 5 p.m. Closed summer Sundays. Admission is \$5 for adults, \$2.50 for students and senior citizens, and free for children under 6. Information: 215-898-4000.

## Notes

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REVIEW: EXHIBIT

## Graphic

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PHOTO;

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1. In 1948, Concepcion Zapata gave thanks for being saved from abduction.

Retablos were often displayed in Mexican churches. (University of Pennsylvania Museum)

2. A retablo gives thanks for a recovery.

3. Josefina Rivera falls beneath the wheels of a bus in a 1954 retablo, which expresses her thanks for surviving.

4. A dangerous operation prompted this 1961 retablo. Illustrations usually include the Virgin Mary, Christ or a saint.

## Classification

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