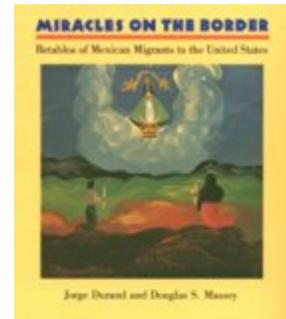


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jorge Durand, Douglas S. Massey. *Miracles on the Border: Retablos of Mexican Migrants to the United States*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995. xvi + 216 pp. \$52.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8165-1471-7; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8165-1497-7.

Reviewed by Ray F. Broussard (University of Georgia)  
Published on H-LatAm (March, 1996)



To some Latin Americanists not current with the latest developments in cultural and artistic history of the area, the word *retablo* is used to refer to the highly decorated and ornate backdrop to a church altar. It was a revelation as well as an educational experience for this reviewer to discover that the small devotional paintings seen near images in various Mexican churches are also known as *retablos* and are the subject of this fine study.

It was an exercise in humility to recall visiting churches all over Mexico and admiring the architecture, paintings and sculpture, but ignoring and dismissing the many *retablos* clustered about the icons and images venerated by the faithful. This well written and articulate work focuses upon the background and historical development of these votive offerings. It reveals the importance of such folk art and traces its origins and history in considerable and well-documented detail.

The custom of pious people establishing a shrine in their homes began as early as the seventeenth century. Relatively wealthy creoles commissioned artists to paint copies of their favorite holy images so that they could pray in the comfort of their own homes. According to the authors, these relatively small religious paintings were termed *santos*. In the eighteenth century, the custom of painting on tin or copper began. By the twentieth century, however, the *santos* type painting began to disappear as modern technology made it possible to reproduce cheap prints from lithographs. By the early twentieth century, the painted *santos* had almost disappeared.

Votive paintings on the other hand, though similar to *santos* in appearance have an entirely different origin. According to the authors, the practice of leaving objects to thank or supplicate a deity has pre-Christian

roots, both in Europe and Mesoamerica (p. 9). Earliest examples of this were small anatomical figures of wax, wood or clay left at sites of veneration. It wasn't until the fifteenth century that the more elaborate practice of leaving painted *ex-votos* at religious shrines developed.

From Europe the custom was brought to Spanish America by soldiers and settlers. It spread slowly, however, for there were only a very few sites during the early days. The first shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe at Tepayac was not constructed until 1622 (p. 11). By this time, the *retablo* contained three elements. First there was a reproduction of the image to which the supplicant had prayed and requested a favor. It was usually depicted as floating in the air on a cloud. Then there was depicted in some form the miracle which occurred. Finally, there was painted a short text which dated and which described the event and expressed gratitude for the favor granted (p. 10).

Because they were painted on canvas or wood, not many of the *retablos* from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries remain. By the nineteenth century the custom of painting on tin began and there are numerous examples of them still available. It was also obvious that the economic and social level of those ordering the paintings had changed. No longer wealthy creoles, but more humble and poorer mestizos were not primarily responsible for requesting the *retablos* (p. 15). Since they could not afford large fees, the artists who produced these paintings were humble people from the same social class as those ordering the *retablos*. Thus we have true folk art.

While *retablos* were the work of untrained popular artists, they have been so popular and ubiquitous that

they have influenced and attracted the attention of better known artists. The authors catalogue the manner in which the retablo tradition has influenced Mexican artists, particularly those of the Revolution. The list of those influenced contains such names as Posada, Zarraga, Dr. Atl, Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, Freida Kahlo and Jean Charlot (p. 38).

After explaining and analyzing the historical background of retablo painting, the authors turn to a description and history of eight images from among the hundreds available in Mexico. These shrines consisted of four of the crucified Christ, one of the infant Jesus and three of the Virgin Mary. They were chosen primarily because of their location in central western Mexico, the area from which the greatest number of migrants to the United States come (pp. 46-47). The states are Zacatecas, San Luis Potosi, Jalisco, Guanajuato and Michoacan. Working their way through an extensive collection of retablos, the authors selected a representative group of 129 to analyze and quantify. They first arranged the retablos according to the images to which they were addressed. By a large margin, almost half, the most popular images represented in the retablos studied was that of the Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos which is located in the state of Jalisco. The other paintings were scattered among the other icons mentioned.

So popular was the Virgen de San Juan de Los Lagos that a reproduction of the image was made and transferred to the local parish church in San Juan, Texas. In this manner a substitute shrine was constructed there for Mexicans in the United States who found it difficult to travel all the way to Jalisco. It became known as the Virgen de San Juan del Valle. An interesting exercise in cultural transferring occurred there. The priests promoted the shrine took to the radio and broadcast appeals for support in the best tradition of U.S. evangelicals. The appeals worked and sufficient funds were collected to construct the church and shrine which is not the focus of many pilgrimages by Mexicans living in the United States. It is somewhat different from Mexican shrines, however, for the pilgrims have left no retablos at the shrine of the Virgen de San Juan del Valle. As its popularity increased, however, and the shrine became prosperous, surplus funds were used to construct a school a pilgrim hotel and a home for the aged (pp. 64-65). This type of expansion seems to be more in the U.S. than the Mexican religious tradition.

In order to analyze the retablos left by Mexican migrants to the United States, the authors categorized them

by subject matter and divided the subjects into six general classifications. The first was entitled "Making the Trip" and comprised approximately 15% of the retablos studied. This group dealt with difficulties encountered travelling northward from their homes and in crossing the border into the United States.

The second group was entitled "Finding One's Way." It consisted of only about 5 percent of the paintings studied. It was mostly concerned with problems dealing with securing employment and adjusting to the strange cultural environment of El Norte as the United States was termed by most migrants.

The third category was entitled "Legal Problems" and accounted for 15 percent of the retablos studied. The authors noted that most of the ex-votos dealt with problems relating to securing proper papers and documentation such as green cards. Most of these retablos were of recent origin and were dated after the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. Prior to that date, these problems were not as acute.

The fourth category was labelled "Medical Problems." One fourth of the retablos fell into this group. This is the largest amount in any classification. Some retablos dealt with illness and some with operations. In all of them, details were quite vague so that it was impossible to determine from the descriptions, the types of illnesses involved.

The next largest group, was a little over 21 percent of the paintings studied. It is entitled "Getting by in the United States." There are several subcategories such as work and traffic accidents which could possibly have been grouped with the fourth or medical problem classification. Another interesting subcategory was surviving military service. This occurred when migrants were drafted into the U.S. armed forces and served in various overseas conflicts from World War I to Desert Storm.

The last division of retablos was that entitled "Homecoming." About 18 percent of the paintings were placed in this category. They contain many eloquent expressions of gratitude for safe returns from El Norte. Some of these were commissioned by returned migrants themselves while others were ordered by grateful wives or parents.

The authors also classified the retablos by time periods. The largest number fell into the two most recent periods. The decades of the 1960s and 1970s had about 18 percent of the paintings, while the modern period of the

1980s and 1990s had almost 20 percent. This reflects the larger numbers of migrants coming to the United States during the last thirty years.

Another way of studying the retablos was to group them according to destinations in the United States. It is not at all surprising that California and Texas were the most popular destinations. Twenty percent of the migrants had California for a destination and 15 percent went to Texas. Other areas were widely scattered with none reaching 10 percent.

Finally, the authors attempted to classify the retablos by gender. In most categories the division was about even. Only when dealing with legal and medical problems did retablos ordered by women outnumber those commissioned by men. In these cases, the difference was approximately 60 percent women to 40 percent men.

The last part of the book contains magnificent color reproductions of 40 of the retablos. On the facing page, the authors placed the Spanish text and an English translation. Of greater interest, however, was the artistic description and analysis of the painting and its contents. An effort was made in some of the descriptions to speculate as to the actual events which may have taken place. This was done when the picture and text were not sufficiently clear and detailed.

This is a beautiful book. It is well written and superbly edited. The paper used is of archival quality thus making the reproductions of the retablos as vivid and beautiful as possible. It will certainly be useful as a reference for those researching the history of Mexican migration to the United States. It is of such high quality that it could be proudly displayed on the coffee table where many families display their art books.

There have been many studies of Mexican immigration to the United States. It has been going for a long time, but has grown exponentially in recent decades. Once confined to the border areas of Texas and California, it has gradually spread to the entire country. There is hardly an area where Mexicans do not live and work. Their cultural impact is not being felt and it is estimated that within another decade Hispanics will be the largest minority in the country.

One factor makes Mexican migrants unique, however, and that is the ease with which they can journey to their homeland. It is not at all unusual for these workers to return to Mexico for holidays and family celebrations. As the authors note, there is hardly a family in west central Mexico that does not have a member in El Norte. Money sent home by Mexican workers in the United States is now recognized as an important factor in the Mexican economy.

The ease with which these people slip from one culture to another has tended to develop what the authors term a new "transnational culture." As they state:

"working in the United States is now an institutionalized feature of that nation's [Mexico's] culture and society. It has been interwoven into the rituals of daily religious life and has itself transformed those rituals. In western Mexico, seeing a retablo signed in Los Angeles, Dallas, or Chicago is as natural as seeing one from Guadalajara, Morelia or Leon" (p. 120).

Copyright (c) 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

**Citation:** Ray F. Broussard. Review of Durand, Jorge; Massey, Douglas S., *Miracles on the Border: Retablos of Mexican Migrants to the United States*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. March, 1996.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=320>

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).