

LEVEL: MIDDLE GRADES

Source: Gibbs, Virginia G. *Latin America: Curriculum Materials for the Middle Grades*. Center for Latin America, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. 1985. 1989.

CATEGORY: MEXICO: NOW

CONCEPTS: RELIGION, art

ACTIVITY: MAKING RETABLOS. Retablos are three dimensional picture/sculptures contained in a box. Originally portable, 3-part altar pieces (triptych), they have continued and thrived as a folk craft portraying secular rather than religious themes. In Mexico they continue to be small boxes, like tiny houses, which open up to reveal a scene with objects and people. In New Mexico retablos have become religious pictures, like icons, painted on wood or framed panels usually portraying the lives of saints.

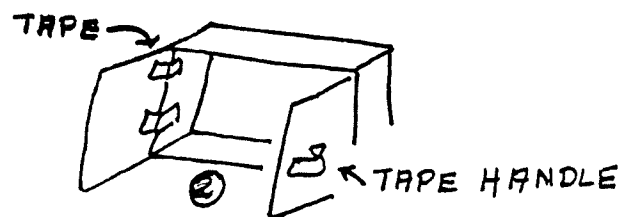
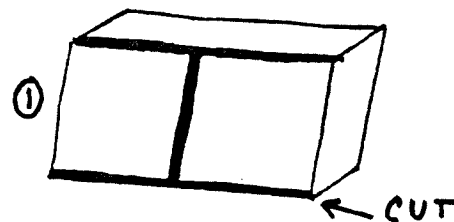
OBJECTIVES: Students will make their own retablos, illustrating a village scene, a story, a legend, or other topic. They can also learn of the relationship of one aspect of religion, church art, to the daily lives of the Mexican people.

MATERIALS: Paint (tempera, acrylic, flourescent)
clay gesso or white latex
boxes or cardboard (recipes follow)
brushes tape
glue
scissors
flower wire or pipe cleaners

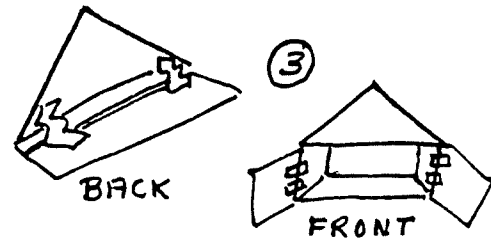
PROCEDURE: Have the students decide individually what they would like to portray. They can get ideas from their textbook, other exercises from this handbook, magazines, etc. Scenes from folktales of Mexico are an interesting source. A theme can also be set such as agriculture, Mexican family life, markets, festivals or holidays, which students could research. Have the students sketch preliminary plans in pencil.

To complete the retablos follow these steps:

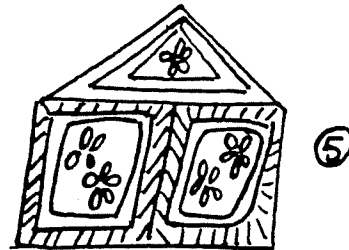
1. Use a cereal box or other relatively small box. Cut 2 doors on one large side.
2. Reinforce the hinges on the inside with tape and make a handle on one side.
3. You can make a gable from another piece of cardboard. Reinforce with tape and another piece of cardboard.



4. Paint inside and out with heavy white paint or "gesso."
5. Sketch and paint backgrounds and outside decorations (flowers, abstract designs, etc.) Use bright colors but leave some white showing. Use acrylic paint, very thick tempera, model paint (laquer) or nailpolish.



6. Make model people, furniture, etc. from paper, dough, clay-dough, pipe cleaners and the like, making sure they are small enough to fit into the box. Small toys or miniatures can also be used. Glue them in, so they stay firmly.



Here are some recipes for making the small figures:

- I. Make animals and people from pipe cleaners.
 - A. Wrap them with yarn of appropriate colors.
 - B. Dip in heavy white latex paint, modelling paste or gesso. Paint appropriately. (Liquitex and Hypolar are brands of acrylic paints and media that are found in art and paint stores. Follow directions and wash all tools and brushes immediately.)
 - C. Dip in laundry starch or Elmers glue and paint when dry.
- II. Salt and Flour dough.
 - A. Map mix (for relief maps or relief decorations). Mix together 1/2 cup salt and 1 cup flour. Add enough water to get a soft mashed potato consistency.
 - B. Salt clay. Mix 1/2 cup salt, 1/4 cup cornstarch, 1/4 cup water. Place in small, heavy pot and stir over low heat until it is one lump. Use to model objects and figures as soon as it is cool enough to handle. (8 boxes of salt, 8 cups of cornstarch and 8 cups of water makes enough for 32 kids.)

III. Bread Dough

Use one pie tin or plastic tray, four slices of fluffy white bread (crusts removed, torn into small bits), and 2-3 table-spoons of Elmer's glue (more if bread is dry.) Mix the bread and glue with the fingers of one hand until it is like clay. It takes about 5 minutes to get a small, apple-sized lump. Model using toothpicks or pencils for details. Paint as in other figures.

IV. Fake Varnish

To finish off figures, you can use a mixture of 1/2 white glue and 1/2 water. This gives a "professional sheen." (Fake white gesso can be made with a mixture of 1/2 white glue and 1/2 white tempera paint.)

VOCABULARY: retablo, triptych, secular, religious, icon

RELATED ACTIVITIES: To give full meaning to this activity the students should know the background of the retablo. Examples of triptych and retablos can be found in most books of Mexican art. Explain the following: retablos developed partly as an evangelizing tool. In order to reach small groups of population, missionaries or priests needed to carry with them examples of their teachings. Retablos can be carried and used to illustrate lessons or serve as "props" for religious celebrations. Once Catholicized, people in small villages certainly could not afford expensive paintings or ornamentation for village churches. They made their own retablos and church art became part of their everyday life. With time, they began to make retablos showing scenes of secular life as well.

RESOURCES: Bradley Smith, Mexico: A History in Art, New York: Doubleday, 1968.

