Miracles of Mexican Folk Art: Retablos and Ex-Votos
January 23 - March 1, 1998

This traveling exhibition of rare 18th and 19th century Mexican religious folk paintings, which was supplemented with paintings and sculptures from the college's Permanent Collection was planned as part of the college's celebration of Religious Emphasis Week, (January 26-31). Gloria Giffords, author of Mexican Folk Retablos and a painting conservator from Phoenix, Arizona, offered a guided tour of the exhibition.

A unique and vivid celebration of Mexico's vibrant artistic and religious heritage, the traveling exhibition included 36 religious votive paintings that were assembled by AMERICAS: Institute of Art, Culture and History under the direction of anthropologist Dr. Antonio Sanchez, with the assistance of Maria Carolina Lucero, and Dr. Isidro Gallegos. It is circulated by Exhibit Touring Services (ETS), a program in the College of Letters, Arts and Social Sciences at Eastern Washington University.

The paintings, made during the Mexican post-colonial period between 1780 and 1910, expressively, yet with unaffected simplicity, depict Christian religious personages that were held in strict devotion. In addition to the paintings on loan, the exhibition included a retablo painting portraying the Two Trinities, a gift to Guilford College Art Gallery by Mr. and Mrs. William J. Moore of Greensboro. Mr. Moore is director of the Greensboro Historical Museum, and a member of the Guilford College Friends of Hege Library board.

Retablos are oil paintings, usually on tin, of a Christian saint or saints. They were painted by untrained artists from the provinces of Mexico. Although retablos are captivating and colorful, they were used less for adornment than for protection for the home and its inhabitants against the maladies of life. Devout Mexicans placed them on their home altars, where they were appealed to for good health, prosperity, and relationships, protection from all evils and for eternal salvation. The use and worship of retablos was a very central part of the lives of the Mexican people, and their power and meaning carry on even today.

The second type of religious folk painting on display is the ex-voto. Ex-voto paintings serve as a visual testimony of a miracle that has occurred or as a commemoration of a blessing received. The term ex-voto is a Latin word which literally means dedicated gifts. Traditionally the painting was executed on copper, tin or wood by a professional ex-voto painter in the village. The client would seek out the artist and relate the miracle's scenario. The painter would then interpret the story with words and pictures. These votive paintings are one of the most expressive types of folk art known to the new world. Each painting tells a unique story and captures the depth and charm of rural Mexican life.