



St. Lucas, artist unknown

SURFACE TREATMENT

What: "Mexican and Latin American Folk Art"
From the museum's permanent collection
Where: International Museum of Art & Science, 1900 Nolana
When: Permanent display

Folk Art or Artesania?

This exhibit is a pleasant window into the aesthetic psyche of traditional Mexico.

BY NANCY MOYER

SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

Previously known as the Central Gallery at IMAS, The Mexican and Latin American Folk Art Gallery is now dedicated to the IMAS permanent collection of folk art. The inaugural exhibition, "Mexican and Latin American Folk Art", will be an ongoing exhibition, rotating works from its vast 4,000-piece folk art collection of pottery, masks, paper-arts and papier-maché, lacquerware, ceramics, textiles, and ceremonial objects. Most appear to be from Mexico.

The dedication of this gallery is appropriate. Folk art is a window into the history of its people, as well as to their psyche. This collection is no exception; traces of Mexican and Latin American heritage can be seen throughout this exhibit. Pre-Hispanic aesthetics sift their way through the 500 years of European influence, shining in work that departs from early origins only in function or materials. The vivid colors of Olinalá lacquerware speak of the vivid colors of tropical bird plumage once used for aristocratic ceremonial apparel. We recognize the geometric patterns on the clay earthenware, like the burro "Bank", on figurines and vases uncovered in ancient tombs. The use of masks dates

back 3000 years in Mesoamerica and were once worn by priests to ward off evil spirits, then they were worn to tell Christian stories, now they are worn by villagers at festivals depicting a variety of identities.

Referred to as “artesanía” in Mexico, this term was invented during the 20th century to distinguish merchandise made by hand from that made by industrial methods, and has since developed broader connotations than just “folk art”. While the hand-making of small objects has foundations going back thousands of years, it has developed it into a unique form of art in the Americas. The works in this exhibit are primarily from Mexico, with a few from Guatemala and Peru, and because folk artists are community-based, pieces are identified by their particular regions. Geographic diversity and the lack of road links between different regions isolating ethnic groups preserved traditional community heritage, allowing the development of distinctive creative directions.

In this show, the links to pre-conquest art are fascinating. In addition to the clay, masks, and lacquerware, “Nearika”, a yarn painting by Francisco Bautista depicts a variety of ritual arts long practiced by the Huichol. It includes symbolic patterns of plants and animal spirits, which are called “nierika”. Because of their isolation in the mountains and canyons of Nayarit, the Huichol, alone among the indigenous peoples of Mexico, were able to largely resist conversion to Christianity by the Spanish conquistadors and have maintained their religion and traditions nearly intact. This piece is particularly significant for its traditional religious composition and its symbols of healing spirits. A Huichol man’s garment nearby is embellished with embroidered images sacred to the culture and meant to protect the wearer.

The “Mexican and Latin American Folk Art” exhibition is a pleasant one, consisting of engaging pieces that reflect belief systems, customs, humor, and beauty. Even lesser pieces are interesting. As the world has become more familiar with Mexico and Latin America, South Texas feels a part of it through proximity, travel, and immigration. These works feel familiar and enjoyable. Time spent in this gallery encourages a tranquil state of mind - a wonderful respite from our restless times.

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