



c. 1803

Oil on canvas

33 3/4 x 24 1/2 inches (85.7 x 62.2 cm)

Mexican

The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection,
1950, 1950-134-492

FIRST LOOKS

Who can you see in this painting?

Which people are shown more than once?

Where are these people?

Describe the setting.

What is happening?

Make up a story that this painting could be telling.

Look at the writing below the painting. What language is used?
(see Translation)

SECOND LOOKS

How does the artist show us two different stages of the same event?

What is the brightest color in this painting? Which colors are complementary colors?
What is the main color?

How does this painting look like a stage set or a diorama?

Does this painting remind you of any events in your own life?

FALL FROM A BALCONY

What is happening in this painting? A woman in a red skirt holding a baby is falling through the floor of a wooden balcony. Dishes and bits of wood fly through the air. The same woman appears below, bending over the baby. Miraculously, the woman and the baby are not injured and even the dishes have landed unbroken! The only witness to this surprising event is a beautiful young woman whose head and shoulders float above in the upper left corner of the painting. Dressed in white, she is holding a small white bird and her head is surrounded by a golden halo that looks like a sunburst. Who could she be? When this painting was made around 1803, people in Mexico would have easily recognized her as Mary, the mother of Jesus, and a saint in the Catholic faith. Mary has been widely revered in Mexico since it became a Catholic country under Spanish rule.

This painting illustrates the story of a miracle. According to the account written in Spanish beneath the painting, when the balcony started to collapse the young woman “invoked the spirit of Holy Mary.” As a result, Mary’s divine powers prevented any harm to the young woman or the baby. This dramatic event takes place in a shallow, geometric space formed by the smooth, light brown walls of a building (a store with living space on the second floor) and the cobblestones on the ground.

Paintings like this are called ex-votos. Ex-voto is Latin for “by reason of a vow,” and refers to a vow, or promise, made to a divine figure in a moment of great need or danger in return for their aid. The tradition of ex-voto paintings traveled from Spain to the New World. During the colonial era in Mexico, wealthy people commissioned ex-votos painted in oil on canvas, like this one. Ex-voto makers were usually anonymous because they were artisans who made works of art to document miraculous events rather than to show off their own

skill and creativity. After Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821, ex-votos painted on small sheets of tin, an inexpensive material, became very popular. For illiterate people, they were an ideal way of publicly expressing gratitude to specific saints because everyone could understand from the pictures alone exactly what happened and who was being thanked.

ABOUT ART AND DEVOTION IN COLONIAL MEXICO

After Hernán Cortés's conquest in 1521, Mexican culture was forever transformed by an influx of Spanish people, goods, customs, and beliefs. Catholic missionaries converted the majority of the indigenous (native) population from the worship of multiple gods and goddesses to Christian beliefs. Many new churches were built on the sites of ancient Aztec shrines, mountains long believed to possess supernatural powers. They contained sacred images—paintings and statues of holy personages—which became a central part of the conversion process. People began to believe that certain images were miraculous because they solved impossible problems, appeared miraculously from nowhere, or had miraculous histories, such as being rediscovered after centuries of being lost. Together, the sacred images, ex-voto paintings, and ancient sites became popular pilgrimage destinations.

The most visited pilgrimage site in the Western Hemisphere is a church dedicated to Mary called la Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe), which contains the most famous sacred image in Mexico. It was built at Tepeyac, formerly a shrine to the Aztec goddess Tonantzin (toe-NAHT-zeen), the Mother of the Gods, located on a hill in present-day Mexico City. According to the story, in 1531 Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to an Aztec named Juan Diego and told him that she wished a church to be built there. Juan related his vision to the bishop, but the bishop was skeptical and asked for a sign from Mary. When Juan returned to the hill, Mary told him to climb even higher where he would find roses growing despite the cold, frosty weather. Miraculously, he discovered a field of roses, which he gathered into his cloak and carried to the bishop. Even more astounding was the painting of Mary wearing a crown and standing on a moon that appeared on the inside of his cloak. When people learned that the mother of Jesus had appeared to Juan Diego and spoken to him in his native language, thousands came to see the sacred image on his cloak. Six years later, more than eight million people had converted to Christianity. Also known as the Virgin of Guadalupe, Our Lady of Guadalupe has become the patron saint of the nation and a symbol of the ethnic and cultural mix of Mexico. Juan Diego was canonized (named a Catholic saint) in 2002.

TRANSLATION OF WRITING BELOW PAINTING

On Tuesday, the 22 of February in the year 1803, the third day of Shrovetide [Carnival or Mardi Gras], between eight and nine in the morning, the maidservant Barbara Rico was on the balcony of the store with the two-and-a-half-year-old baby in her arms when suddenly and without a cause the balcony collapsed. The maidservant, with the baby in her arms, fell from a height of six-and-a-half yards to the cobblestone-covered ground. The fall separated them, but no harm or injury came to either because the maidservant invoked the spirit of Holy Mary, whose intercession allowed them to see this wonderful sign.

CONNECT AND COMPARE

Look up the word *miracle* in several dictionaries. Which definition do you prefer? Why?

Research various aspects of the Virgin Mary popular in Mexico. What are the special characteristics of: Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Our Lady of Guadalupe), Nuestra Señora de los Remedios (Our Lady of Remedies), Nuestra Señora de los Dolores (Our Lady of Sorrows), Alma de María Santísima (Soul of Mary Most Holy), and La Purísima (Mary Most Pure)?

Investigate pilgrimage in the beliefs of ancient Greece, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Discuss why journeying to sacred sites is so special.

RELATED ART PROJECT

Write a detailed description of an important, dramatic event in your life—an accident, illness, birth, death, rescue, or move. Then pretend to commission yourself or a classmate to create a picture or diorama that depicts the event. As a class, try to match the pictures with the written descriptions. Then attach the descriptions to the pictures. Discuss both the pictures and the written descriptions. Which is more accurate? Why? Is one more expressive? Why?

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