RESIGNIFYING RELIGION

LATIN AMERICAN SYNCRETIC RELIGIONS

VIRTUAL EXHIBITION

NORAH ECCLES HARRISON MUSEUM OF ART

DECEMBER-JANUARY

CURATED BY BECCA MATHIS
Rebecca Mathis is studying Latin American art here at USU. Rebecca has a passion for History and Art and how it influences the modern world. As a student in the Interior Architecture and Design program she has found inspiration from artists and styles throughout history to influence her work. In a similar way, as she has studied Latin American Art she has noticed how people have taken influences from the past and molded it to fit their current knowledge.
Resignification is taking something from the past and making it new based on present knowledge and understanding. Resignifying Religion examines this phenomenon as it concerns syncretic religions in Latin America. Religious Syncretism is the blending of two or more religions and belief systems into one new religion. The European conquest was a catalyst for syncretic religions. A vital goal of the conquest was to convert indigenous peoples to Christianity. While many were converted, they still hung onto some of their previous beliefs. Instead of fully converting they resignified their new knowledge to fit their previous knowledge and vice versa.

Religious artwork in Latin American history tells the story of two very different cultures and religions coming together, and how mixed people syncretized where they could. In a similar way, artists today are challenging organized religion and giving their take on what religion and truth is for them. Juxtaposed ideas and iconography call your eyes to look and your mind to question. Viewers will see works of art that will have you questioning what you once thought about organized religion and what religious truth is. For many, truth has become something personal, not just a collective idea. The exhibition displays artists discovering religious personal truth and resignification of oneself.

Throughout the exhibit, the viewer will encounter artworks dating back to early colonial times where large-scale syncretism occurred to today’s artists who have taken an individual approach to syncretism. Such artists include Jose Clemente Orozco, Remedies Varo, Enrique Guzman, and Zahum B. Zenil.

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“Las Limas Madonna” is a greenstone sculpture of a person holding a were-jaguar baby. The were-jaguar is a half-human/half-jaguar figure supernatural being that the Olmecs worshipped. Were-Jaguar babies are commonly found in Olmec sculptures and may have been used to tell stories of spiritual journeys and human origins. The were-jaguar baby may have also been a symbol or being that could connect the Olmecs to divinity and divine power. Here we see the Olmecs making intangible concepts of their religion tangible. Since they couldn’t physically see the origin of humanity or a divine realm, they created a narrative for it. To connect to divinity, they created a creature that was both human and divine that could bridge the gap between them and their gods. As their beliefs expounded outside of the realm of their reality, the Olmecs were able to resignify by creating physical elements of divine realms such as the were-jaguar baby.
Juan Correa paints the Virgin Mary and surrounds her with the sun, the moon at her feet, and a crown of stars around her head. Although Correa painted the Virgin Mary similar to many old-world depictions, her figure also resembles the Virgin of Guadalupe. The Virgin of Guadalupe arose in Mexico during the fifteen hundreds when a man by the name of Juan Diego was greeted by an apparition, he would soon call the Virgin of Guadalupe. He constructed a shrine, and many others started to worship her as the mother of all humanity. As artists started to render her, they gave her darker skin to appeal to natives. Correra followed this tread and painted the virgin with brown skin. Seeing the similarities between the Old World and New world Madonna’s helped indigenous people to resignify as new religions were introduced.
Luis de Mena’s “Casta Painting” shows the results of inter-racial mixing and belief in the dilution of “pure” Spanish, African and Indigenous blood. Casta paintings were common in Latin American art, but what makes this “Casta Painting” different are the two distinct subject matters: the Virgin of Guadalupe and racial hierarchy. The great mystery of this painting is why De Mena chose to juxtapose these two themes. Looking at the hierarchy, De Mena has chosen to place a Spanish woman and an indigenous man in the first casta set, which undermines the traditional assertion of a Spanish male being dominant in the social hierarchy. A similar trend continues for women in the painting.

The Virgin in this painting acts as a mediator who does not play favorites. Race and even gender are brought to greater equality compared to earlier casta paintings. De Mena includes a divine presence in Mexico’s social hierarchy to create peace and order where inequality is present. Here we see De Mena combining his religion and views on inter-ethnic mixing to show that they are in harmony.
Miguel Cabera paints a Portrait of Sor Juana Ines de Cruz; a nun and an intellectual. As a typical nun portrait, Sor Juana is dressed as a nun and wears the badge Escudo de Monia, depicting the Annunciation. However, hers differs in the way she looks toward the viewer and is surrounded by her library and other learning instruments. Her library contains books on philosophy, natural science, mythology, and history. Pursuing intellect was common in the Catholic Church, but there are few representations of women pursuing knowledge in this manner. Her intellect and devotion to religion may be viewed as at odds with one another. But here Cabrera emphasis’ both and shows how Sor Juana has molded her beliefs to build off each other. What she has learned from science has also built up her faith, this is how she is resignifying and building up her truth.
At the center of this painting stands Bartolome de las Casas, a Spanish Dominican friar. At his feet is a couple who were plagued by the violence of conquest as they came to pay respect to a loved one at an indigenous temple. Bartolome de las Casas wrote a book that defended indigenous people against the horrible violence they experienced because of the conquest of the new world. Here we see the artist, Felix Parra, create a scene that displays these feelings and condemns the acts of conquest. Both Bartolome de las Casas and Parra see the wrongs of the conquest and its disconnect from catholic beliefs. They are revealing that the so-called "noble" Christian conquistadors who were supposed to bring civilization and salvation to the Americas, were committing genocide in their desire for wealth and glory. Las Casas too profited from the conquest and slave trade of the indigenous people in the beginning, yet in his resignification he saw the wrongs of it warned others not to make the same mistake.
Growing up in a religious home, Angel Zarraga often contemplated his spirituality. Painting was a way for Zarraga to connect with the divine through visual representation. Zarraga was very fond of St. Sebastian and used him as a muse for many of his works, as in Ex-voto, San Sebastian. St. Sebastian was an early Christian saint and martyr and is often worshipped as a protector. Zarraga depicts a connection with God as the woman at his feet comes to pray. But he also brings forth lust of the flesh in the way St. Sebastian is modeled. Juxtaposing these two feelings, Zarraga deviates from most Christian works of art and shows that these can be felt in unison. Zarraga was a romantic painter and therefore pushed the buttons of sexuality, even in religious works. His views on religion and sexuality are brought together harmoniously and is something that he has resignified in his life.
Nahum B. Zenil’s father was not present during his childhood, so Zenil turned to religion to fill that parental void. Present in many of his works are symbols of the Catholic Church, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe in Benediciones. While having a firm faith in Catholicism, Zenil also discusses the topic of sexual identity and how he navigates this and religion in his life. Zenil paints himself in his work to represent others who are gay, many of which are afraid to display it publicly. Here in Benediciones, he paints himself and his lover at the altar to be married before the Virgin of Guadalupe. His displays of homosexuality go against what the Catholic Church believes, yet he paints the Virgin of Guadalupe and other Catholic figures alongside him because he believes that they will protect him from societies criticisms. Zenil believes that loving a man does not make him a sinner. Although this belief goes against what the Catholic Church teaches, he has resignified and embraced both homosexuality and Christianity in his life.
Leonora Carrington presents themes of fertility, aging, supernatural and culinary practices throughout her works. Here in The Old Maids, women and animals are surrounding a kitchen table. At the center is a smaller figure with a spiked halo, common in Catholic imagery. Carrington focused on blurring the divisions between humans, animals, and food. Animals eating alongside the women, for example. Carrington was a surrealist painter, so her artwork may seem other-worldly. And that is her intent, to bridge the gap between our conscious reality and things that we dream up in our head. In her resignification, she has melded the Catholic influence around her and her interests in Surrealism. She has created a truth for herself in the realms between conscious and sub-conscious thoughts.
Enrique Guzman is known for constructing peculiar and often conflicting symbols and elements to form his compositions. His Imagen milagrosa is no different. At the focal point is an image of Jesus whose chest is open to reveal arrows going through his heart. This is a modified image of the sacred heart of Christ, where the heart of Jesus is seen as “God’s boundless and passionate love for mankind.” Above him and to the right is a hand with the same arrows going through, reminiscent of the crucifixion. The most peculiar elements in this work are two toilets. Christ and toilets have no correlation, and it seems borderline blasphemous to place them in the same composition.

Many Christians have criticized him for his work, yet he doesn’t mean to offend or be critical of the Catholic Church. He has selected symbols from urban culture such as a toilet to bring playfulness and a modern approach to a very traditional organization. Guzman has experienced a personal resignification by taking the Catholic Church, which has seen very little change and modernizing it.
Delilah Montoya grew up in New Mexico where she was able to explore her ancestry and identity. Her work represents the mesoamerican culture she came from, its traditions, and folklore from religious and spiritual practices. Here we see one of her installations entitled El Guadalupano, incorporating the Virgen de Guadalupe. The featured photograph is a black-and-white image of a shirtless man who is handcuffed with a colored tattoo of the Virgin of Guadalupe on his back. Surrounding this image are similar photographs in color and an altar set up on the floor. Throughout her works, she challenges outsider stereotypes of the Mesoamerican community. With this piece, Montoya critiques law enforcement in the United States and their treatment of Latinos due to assumptions and stereotypes. Montoya is helping others to resignify their beliefs about the Mesoamerican community and she displays the injustices brought towards the community.
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