Botánica Los Angeles: Latino Popular Religious Art in the City of Angels
Opens at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History Sep. 12

Spend some time driving around the City of Angels, and one quickly realizes that material expressions of spiritual belief are integral to our urban landscape. Cathedrals, temples, churches, and shrines dot the metropolitan grid, placing religious imagery at the most important nodes of residential and commercial activity. A closer look — at the names and facades of businesses, on the dashboards of the vehicles of fellow commuters, dangling from driver’s key chains, or on mantles in private homes — reveals that our lives are replete with religious art, icons, holy images, and other visual components of faith, some strictly orthodox and others fantastically idiosyncratic.

But where do all the guardian angels, broken-tusked Ganeshas, beatific saints, smiling Buddhas, concerned Madonnas, Gaeas, mezuzahs, crucifixes, crescent moons, Stars of David, peaceful doves, happy cats, saint candles, Jesus fish, pentagrams, Conquering Lions of Judah, mystic pyramids, golden pagodas, and the whole host of other spiritually evocative images widely displayed throughout the region come from?

In Los Angeles, botánicas are rapidly becoming one of the most familiar purveyors of these sacramental items, as well as critical in supporting and shaping the ways numerous residents envision and interact with the sacred in everyday life. Patronized here by an only-in-LA clientele that ranges from recent Latin American immigrants to Goth teenagers from the San Fernando Valley, these somewhat mysterious locales — part religious supply house, part spiritual center, and part alternative healthcare facility — are the focus of the exhibition ‘Botánica Los Angeles: Latino Popular Religious Art in the City of Angels’ at UCLA’s Fowler Museum of Cultural History from Sep. 12, 2004 through Feb. 27, 2005.

Generally associated with folk Catholicism and other Latin American religious traditions, the hundreds of botánicas in Los Angeles are sites of spirit-infused artistry, ceremonial activity, and community building, especially among Latinos. Central to all of these activities is the use of religious imagery and visual arts practices — especially shrine building and altar making — as a means of expressing notions of the divine. ‘Botánica Los Angeles’ explores these fascinating venues, the objects in them, and their role in transmitting, transforming, and critiquing traditional faiths.

The exhibition opens with an eye-catching recreation of a typical botánica: chock-full of sacred objects characteristically offered for sale, including candles, incense, religious sculptures of saints and buddhas, curative potions, shrines, chromolithographs, and more. A large cast figure of a Native American, complete with feathered war bonnet, sits cross-legged near statues of Saint Jude, the patron
of the hopeless; San Simón, the Guatemalan trickster saint; and Jesús Malverde, the martyred Robin Hood of the U.S./Mexico borderland. Off to the side is a table and chairs at which a practitioner might provide his/her services.

The exhibition continues with the following series of elaborate altars/shrines created by local practitioners that showcase both the diversity and continuity among botánicas in Los Angeles:

**Elegba Altar**

Created by husband and wife Felipe and Valeria García Villamil, this shrine/throne features a large beaded gourd, several beaded canes, a beaded canteen, and a decorated shoulder bag. It is dedicated to Elegba, a divinity (oricha) recognized by practitioners of Afro-Cuban Santería. Trickster and divine messenger, Elegba facilitates communication between humans and the gods and for this reason is always the first to be invoked in ceremonies. He is also the oricha who controls luck and destiny.

**Shrine for Manuel and Francisca**

Designed by Charles Guelperin, an Argentina-born practitioner of Espiritismo, Santería and El Palo Mayombé, this installation is dedicated to Guelperin’s primary spirit guide Manuel, a deceased African king, and his consort Francisca. Featuring nearly life-sized statues of the two spirit guides seated in front of their palenque (forest house), this altar mirrors those constructed on special occasions at Guelperin’s home as a means of celebrating and honoring Manuel’s supernatural aid.

**Puerto Rican Mesa Blanca Altar**

Using their family’s Puerto Rican-style Espiritismo altar as a model, Ysamur Flores-Peña and Dorothy L. Flores fashion a table altar featuring Catholic holy icons, representations of African, Native American, and East Asian spiritual entities, and an assortment of spirit-invoking candles, perfumes, and flowers. Highlighted in this installation are Madamas, spirits of deceased African slaves generally represented by black dolls and thought to especially nurturing and protective.

**Altars for Ochun/Michaela/Irak**

Sonia Gastelum, owner of Botánica Orula in Lynwood, is both a santera and an espiritista. In her practice, Gastelum recognizes several otherworldly beings whose presence she routinely feels, affecting her personality, shaping her character, and directing her behavior. For the exhibition, she has constructed altars featuring images and sacred objects representing three of the spirits with whom she most often works: an ethereal female Gypsy (gitana) named Irak who guides Gastelum when she is reading the Tarot cards for clients, an African spirit named Michaela who is her primary spiritual guide, and Ochún, the Santería goddess of love, desire and sensuality.

**San Simón Shrine**

A spiritist (espiritista) and folk healer (curandero) from Zamayac Sochiltepeques in Guatemala, Carlos Arana Figueroa Martínez is devoted to San Simón, the unofficial patron saint of Guatemala who is popularly described as a wealthy European visitor to Guatemala who provided food, medicine, and other goods to the indigenous Maya and was miraculously transformed into a saint. This shrine features representations of the saint, who is typically shown as a light-complexioned adult seated in a chair with a cane or staff in his right hand. Normally he wears a wide-brimmed, black hat and white shirt, black suit, shoes or boots, and a red tie. A sly figure that reportedly has a drinking problem, San Simón is often invoked for treatment of addiction, assistance with immigration and other legal matters, and for matters of love and marital relationships.
To complement ‘Botánica Los Angeles,’ the Fowler has invited New York-based contemporary artist Franco Mondini-Ruiz to create ‘Infinito Botánica: L.A.,’ a site-specific installation at the Museum. This project continues the artist’s body of work using the captivating baroque iconography of the botánica to express issues of faith, ethnicity, and identity, in this case particularly in Los Angeles. Mondini-Ruiz’s installation will be created during a two-week artist residency at UCLA, and will include objects from local botánicas as well as tourist shops, street vendors, designer boutiques, thrift stores and the Fowler Museum’s permanent collections. ‘Infinito Botánica: L.A.’ will be on display from Sep. 12, 2004–Jan. 30, 2005.


‘Botánica Los Angeles’ is curated by Patrick A. Polk, visiting assistant professor in UCLA’s Department of World Arts and Cultures. Among the exhibitions he has curated are ‘Cruisin,’ Stylin,’ and Pedal-Scrapin': The Art of the Lowrider Bicycle' (1998) and ‘Muffler Men, Muñecos and Other Welded Wonders: Folk Art from Automotive Debris’ (1999), both at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

‘Botánica Los Angeles’ marks the onset of Year of the Arts at UCLA. The Year of the Arts celebrates UCLA’s position as the University of California’s flagship campus for the arts, and as a national center for artistic research, public arts presentation, and the training of young artists, scholars, and teachers. The Year of the Arts at UCLA is book-ended by the opening of two major arts facilities on the Westwood campus. Newly renovated Glorya Kaufman Hall, featuring state-of-the-art facilities for dance, videography, and cross-cultural investigation in the arts, opens adjacent to the Fowler in Fall 2004. The year culminates in Fall 2005 with the opening of the Edythe L. and Eli Broad Center, which will feature exceptional visual arts exhibitions and the unveiling of a monumental sculpture by Richard Serra. Surrounding these two events, UCLA will present a series of interdisciplinary events in the visual and performing arts, including exhibitions, concerts, and symposia organized by UCLA’s arts leaders, including the Fowler Museum.

Support for ‘Botánica Los Angeles’ is provided by the Donald B. Cordry Memorial Fund, Jim and Jeanne Pieper, Monica Salinas, the Yvonne Lenart Public Programs Fund, and Manus, the support group of the Fowler Museum.

The Fowler Museum is open Wednesdays through Sundays, noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, noon until 8 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA’s School of the Arts and Architecture, is located in the north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is free. Campus parking is available for $7 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call (310) 825-4361 or visit www.fowler.ucla.edu.

Related Programs:

Sun., Sept. 12, 2004 noon–5 pm
Opening Day

2 pm
Artist Talk by Franco Mondini-Ruiz
Followed by a reception in The Elizabeth and W. Thomas Davis Courtyard.
3 pm
Performance by Pacifico Dance Company
See this renowned group in a repertoire of both original and traditional dance from Mexico. Outdoors in the Fowler’s UCLA Art Council Amphitheater.

4 pm
Performance by Franco Mondini-Ruiz
Mondini-Ruiz will offer myriad objects for sale at his “Infinito Botánica and Gift Shop.”

Sun., Oct. 17, 2004 noon–5 pm
Family Festival: CARIBBEAN!
Join performers and artists for a Caribbean-style afternoon, including marimba, reggae, and steel drum music and art-making activities inspired by selected Caribbean cultures.

Sun., Oct. 24, 2004 11 am–4 pm
Fowler on the Town: San Simón Festival
Visit the Templo y Botánica San Simón de los Llanos to celebrate the feast day of San Simón, sponsored by the local Brotherhood of San Simón. Festivities include music, dance, food, and a procession during which worshipers “walk” the saint through nearby streets. Includes transportation from the Fowler. $20 per person. Space is limited, reservations required.

Sun., Nov. 7, 2004 1–5 pm
Symposium: Searching for God in the City of Angels
This interdisciplinary symposium will address a range of popular spiritual practices in Los Angeles. Participants will explore the roots of L.A.’s religious diversity as well as why religions that originate elsewhere develop particular expressive forms here. Keynote by guest curator of ‘Botánica Los Angeles,’ Patrick A. Polk.

Sun., Dec. 5, 2004
Lecture: Inside Botánicas
2 pm Panel Discussion, Lenart Auditorium 3:30–5 pm In-Gallery Commentary
Featured artists/practitioners discuss their contributions to ‘Botánica Los Angeles’ and explain the ways in which altars and shrines reflect their personal experiences, aesthetic ideals, and spiritual beliefs. Following the panel, artists will provide commentary on their installations in the gallery.

Sat., Dec. 11, 2004 1–4 pm
A World of Art Family Workshop: Candle-Making
Make a decorative candle as a holiday gift or for a home altar. Free for members, $5 materials fee for non-members. Reservations required.
Unless otherwise noted, events are FREE and no reservations are required. Event information and reservation line: 310/825-8655.

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