

# **Behind the Painted Doors: Centuries of Andean Tradition**

by

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The concept of *what is art?* vs. *when is art?* is a pertinent question that arises when analyzing any piece of history from an indigenous culture, regardless of if it appears to fit Westernized standards of what typical art looks like. Take for example the strong symbolic representations that are present in Chavín, Nazca, and Inca art- many of which may not outwardly present as a creation made by an “artist”, but nonetheless possess the ability to convey a strong message and provide insight into how these civilizations lived and what was important to them. Just to name a few, consider the notorious archaeological site known as Chavín de Huántar, the vast landscape covered by The Nazca Lines, and the impressive stonework of the Inca Empire. However as centuries went on and Andean cultures and societies developed, so did the way in which their respective ideologies were outwardly portrayed to the rest of the world. Although symbolism and the presence of huacas, objects/concepts with a strong representative or sacred conscience, still remained, Andean art witnessed a shift towards more realistic or reflective depictions of society as it was.

Perhaps the most applicable example of this transition is Peruvian retablos, which made their way to the Andes around the Sixteenth Century and were initially popularized by European colonists. Retablos are portable boxes typically made out of cedar wood and painted with intricate flower details on the outside. At first glance, they may appear as a mundane altarpiece or a decorative object used to adorn a shelf. However, the real magic ensues upon opening the doors of a retablo, which is filled with miniature figurines, everyday objects, or even religious symbols. The miniatures inside are crafted out of dried potato dough (masa) mixed with plaster and calcium and then painted with vibrant colors, creating an elaborate scene that takes more than just a few seconds to fully comprehend and absorb. Their primary subject matter surrounds the concept of daily life and focuses more on the everyday existence of Andean people rather than glorified figures of nobility or divine rituals. But why is this so significant to the historical contexts of both art as a whole as well as what we know about life in the Andes? Thus the question arises- in what ways do retablos provide insight into the lives of Peruvians dating back to the 16th Century, and how are they symbolic of daily life?

Although there were years where Andean tradition flourished independently and free of any outside influence, this inevitably came to a halt when Spanish conquistadors arrived and began colonizing the native land. Granted, this was accompanied by some degree of syncretism which can be defined as the merging of religions, cultures, schools of thought, and overall way of life. In fact, the initial retablos were actually called Cajones San Marcos and used almost exclusively by Catholic Missionaries to facilitate religious teachings in the villages (Mauldin 46). This influence lasted some time, but with the emergence of some freedom came the ability to create and utilize folk art as the Andean people intended, not as a tool for religious conversion or cultural assimilation. In the testimony of renowned Peruvian artist Joaquin López Antay, the key differences between San Marcos and modern retablos are noted, “El retablo no es como el sanmarkos. En el retablo se puede poner lo que el artista quiere: costumbres, reunión... En el sanmarkos sólo se ponen los santos, sus acompañamientos, su pasión y su reunión. Por eso, el retablo lleva mucho trabajo, porque entran más figuras, más acompañamientos” (Razzeto 102). Furthermore, the indigenista movement in the 1940s recognized the work of don Joaquin and kickstarted the desire to create portable boxes that contained scenes which were more reflective of life in Lima and the rest of the Ayacucho region. Not only was this better suited to the ideals of indigenous artists, but retablos became increasingly popularized due to an influx in tourism to the area. The culmination of these factors ultimately led to the widespread creation and usage of retablos that were representative of daily life.

Although the present day perception of Peruvian retablos does indeed surround the idea of typical indigenous lifestyles, it is still essential to acknowledge their divine and spiritual uses which still remained after the rather intense period of colonization by the Europeans had subsided. In fact, “By the eighteenth century, Andean devotion to Catholic images had increased and portable altars were used to keep Christian figures in homes as well as to carry them to local churches to receive blessings from the priests” (Museum of International Folk Art). This may seem to contradict the narrative of Andean-European interactions, but the acceptance of Catholicism was beginning to flourish ever so slightly, accompanied by an integration with the existing native belief system. The portable nature of retablos was crucial in this aspect because

travelers were able to easily carry their personal santos to local rituals and/or mass. Oftentimes the worship surrounding the portable altars consisted of protection for the family, community, crops, and animals, especially in the case of Fiesta de Herranza which took place in the countryside during the warmer months (Mauldin 46). Strong ties to nature and divine beings are commonalities across all aspects of Andean life, and their devout spirituality is reflected in nearly everything they do, including the representation of saints in retablos. “El Cajon San Marcos is meant to represent an “Apu”, which in the Andean world is a sacred place, with figures of saints... on the second floor they will represent the gods that will protect the animals, on the lower level was San Marcos the saint, as the most important figure in the box, the saint that would protect the cattle” (Wise 2017). Evidently, religious symbolism remained a key characteristic of Peruvian retablos and preserved ties to the initial intentions of Catholic missionaries, and while this does provide a look into Andeans’ religious practices, even more can be unveiled by the retablos that depict traditional lifestyles.

In the grand scheme of Andean art, a momentous development occurred when retablos which had been used for worship and teaching purposes for centuries- transitioned to include figures and scenes which served as a lens into the day to day lives of Peruvians. This new composition featured everything from daily routines to the customs of the Ayacucho region, often with a heavy emphasis on the working citizens as they performed their jobs. Sources indicate that around the 1940s, “more and more artists used retablos as a means to confirm and document the distinct identities of the indigenous peoples of the Andean regions. They also protect indigenous cultures and values in the face of modernization and cultural penetration by Lima's white Hispanic elite” (Academic Accelerator 2021). The post-independence era provided a great foundation upon which artists could take their respective mediums and create folk art that tied in aspects of patriotism, costumbrismo (emphasis on common themes), and the indigenista movement (greater social status for indigenous people).

The construction and composition of these portable boxes also changed immensely alongside their subject matter, which was largely pioneered by two brothers named Jesús and Julio Urbano Rojas. Their alterations to the previous forms of retablos included using larger

boxes which had several stacked levels or tiers, where each one presented a different scene. They were intrigued by the newfound ability to represent what took place in Andean markets, villages, and festivals such as the popular art of bullfighting. All of this could be presented to the viewer simultaneously as a result of the stacked tier technique; an example being, "... the top has a Christmas creche that was popular with collectors. The next level down portrays an animal blessing ceremony with the patron saints against the back wall... the third level shows people picking cactus fruit and the fourth has a festival scene" (Mauldin 232). This not only demonstrates the flexibility granted to folk artists in Peru at the time and even up to modern day, but also the vast amount of knowledge that can be obtained from viewing works of art such as retablos which paint such a clear picture of how indigenous cultures lived years before us.

In relation to other popular Andean art forms such as story gourds, feather headdresses, or woven tapestries, there's no doubt that Peruvian retablos have a significantly different manner of presentation. There's an immense amount of historical significance which stems from this contrast, and it could even be asserted that this artistic representation of daily life paved the way for future generations of Andean artists as well as on a global scale. Many communities used this method to document their local histories and experiences because it facilitates two-way communication with audiences, allowing them to deeply analyze a scene presented in a retablo and develop potential questions or points of curiosity. In relation to more modernized or contemporary uses, some controversies have actually arisen surrounding their contents. One example is retablos which depict El Sendero Luminoso (The Shining Path), "the exploitation and abuse of indigenous peoples and the plight of Andean people caught between leftist guerrillas and state security forces" (Academic Accelerator 2021). Although representation of modern themes is not unique to just retablos, as there are Tigua paintings which show recent national tragedies or political strifes, it's the way in which retablos encapsulate the perspective of the "common person". By doing so they provide an active portrayal, rather than a moment frozen in time or a snapshot shown by a painting or carving. The work of indigenous artists who created retablos both in the past and present deserves profound applause for the way it reshaped traditional artistic standards, adding movement and visible emotion to previously static scenes.

All in all, it is evident that Peruvian retablos are perhaps one of the best forms of insight we have into the lives of some of the indigenous cultures that flourished in the Andes as early as the 16th Century. From their elaborately decorated wooden outsides to the ornately crafted miniature figurines found inside, they paint a vivid image of the routines, professions, and festivals that were central to Andeans. The early Catholic influence of the Spanish conquistadors were what drove the initial concept of the portable altar, and those religious undertones prospered for some time until the indigenista movement and other opportunities for independence opened the door for artists to create visuals of what they experienced in their day to day lives. When looking at retablos in comparison to the other forms of Andean art circulating around the same time period, they certainly do an impressive job of eliminating the need for excess interpretation or strenuous analysis. Thanks to this, the answer to the question *how did Peruvians live back in the day?* lies no further than the fantastic scenes that sit just behind the painted doors.

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