

Misfortune, Faith and Healing in Mexican Folk Art

This is an abridged online version of a new exhibition planned for the “Kevin M. Cahill, M.D. Exhibit and Study Center” at Lenox Hill Hospital, New York. The formal hospital opening has had to be postponed due to difficulties of access during the COVID 19 restrictions. This is the eighth major show in this space. The current exhibit is co-curated with Dr. John O’Neill of The Hispanic Society of America.

The ex-voto painting is a Catholic folk art tradition in which a grateful believer gives thanks to a particular saint for their intercession and help in alleviating or resolving the outcome of a particular calamity or accident. The examples that follow illustrate the wide array of ailments or situations for which help was requested, ranging from difficulties in pregnancy, to witchcraft, to a neighbor awakened each morning by a wailing cat.

The ex-votos come in all shapes and sizes, with varying degrees of artistic ability on display. Some take the form of mini-retablos (works of art designed for use as altarpieces) and are painted on wood or canvas in diptych or triptych format (see, for example, panel 12). Although some were subsequently placed in frames (panel 17), the vast majority were painted on plain pieces of tin and were nailed directly onto a wall.

A brief history of the ex-voto in the Hispanic world

According to the Mexican artist Roberto Montenegro, the origins of the votive painting lie in the tradition, common to noble families in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, of commissioning portraits of themselves kneeling in prayer to their favorite saint. This was also a common feature of *cartas de ejecutoria* (letters patent of nobility) which flourished in Spain and which the Spanish colonizers brought with them to the so-called New World.

Carta ejecutoria de hidalguía a pedimiento del capitán Domingo de Castaneda Velasco.

Issued by Philip IV, king of Spain.

Valladolid, 1628

The Hispanic Society Museum & Library



Although votive paintings can be found in their thousands throughout Mexico, two shrines in particular, the Virgin of Guadalupe and Our Lord of Chalma, are especially common.

The Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to the peasant Juan Diego on four occasions between 9-12 December 1531, and on the last occasion miraculously created an image of herself that appeared on Juan Diego's cloak when he opened it to the bishop, Juan de Zumárraga. This account in Nahuatl was published in Mexico City in 1649, one of the earliest portrayals of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe/Our Lady of Guadalupe.

*Hvei Hamahviçoltica omonexiti in
ilhricac tlatoca Çihvapilli Santa Maria
Tottaçonanzin Gvadalvpe ni nican hvei
altepenahvac Mexica itocayocan
tepeyacac.*

Mexico City: Juan Ruiz, 1649.

Title-page

The Hispanic Society Museum & Library



Engraved plate depicting the first apparition to the peasant, Juan Diego.
Taken from a series of poems commemorating the event by José López de Avilés.

José López de Avilés

*Poeticum viridarium in honorem,
laudationem, et obsequium ... Mariae:
eiusdem dominae miraculosae Mexice ae
imaginis de Guadalupe vocatae ...*

Mexico City: Pedro de Quiñones, 1669.

The Hispanic Society Museum & Library



The apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe on the cloak of Juan Diego during his audience with the Bishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumárraga.

*Hvei Hamahviçoltica omonexiti in ilhricac
tlatoca Çihvapilli Santa Maria
Tottaçonanzin Gvadalype ni nican hvei
altepenahvac Mexica itocayocan
tepeyacac.*

Mexico City: Juan Ruiz, 1649.

The Hispanic Society Museum & Library



The apparition of Our Lord of Chalma (the “Cristo de Chalma,” also known as the “Cristo Negro”), dates back to 1537 when an image of the indigenous idol of Oxtoteotl with reputed magical and healing powers that was found in the caves at Chalma, had miraculously been replaced by the life-size figure of a crucified Christ.

Joaquín Sardo

Relacion historica y moral de la portentosa imagen de N. Sr. Jesucristo crucificado aparecida en una de las cuevas de S. Miguel de Chalma,

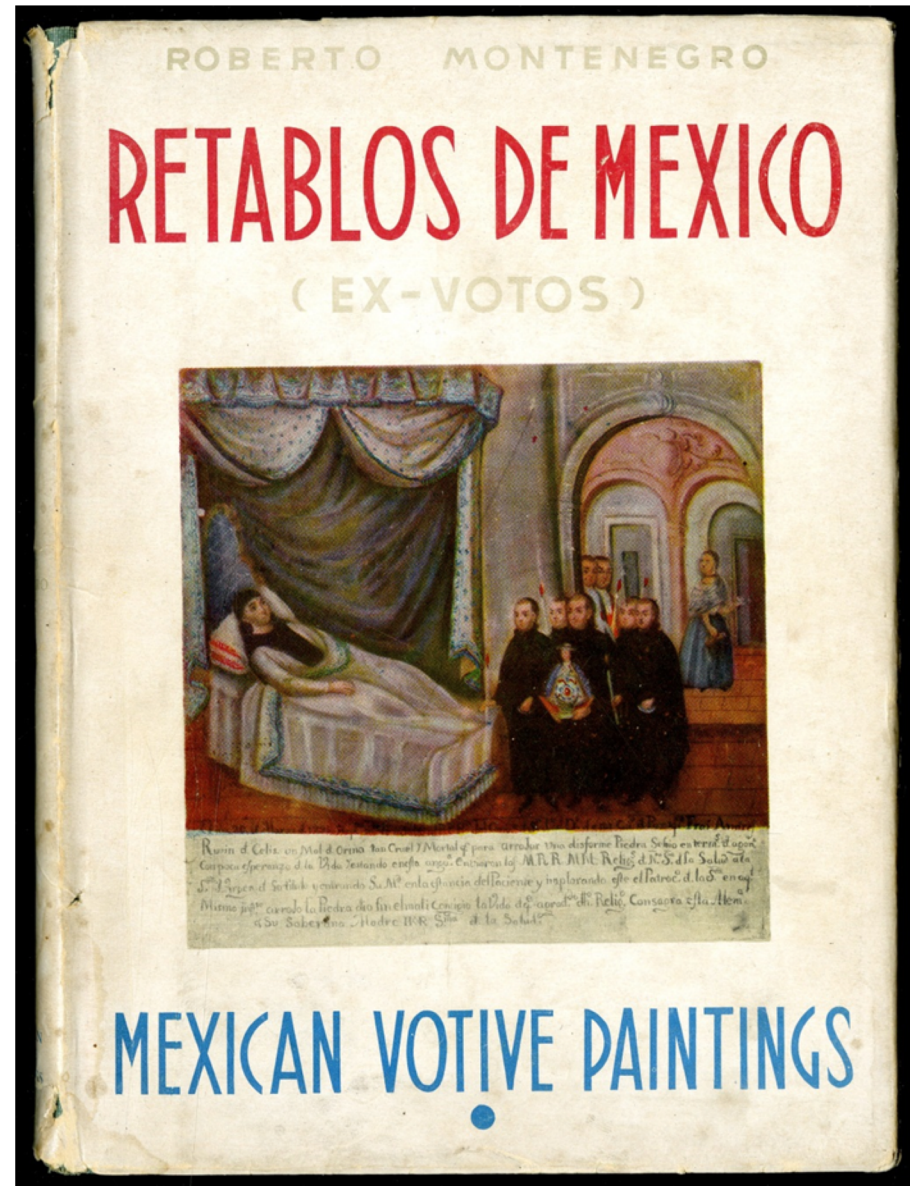
Mexico City: Casa de Arizpe, 1810.

Engraved frontispiece.

The Hispanic Society Museum & Library



These votive paintings, although crude and inelegant in many instances, nevertheless capture the essence of daily life in Mexico with the artists' firm belief in the power of miracles and healing. Artists such as Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera were among the first to recognize the importance of these manifestations of folk art with Frida Kahlo herself amassing a huge collection of ex-voto paintings and using them in her own work to depict episodes from her life. The artist Roberto Montenegro was the first to produce a catalogue of the Mexican votive paintings, published in Mexico City in 1950.



The examples that follow are from private collections.

The captions have been transcribed exactly as written, maintaining the original orthography.



Diptych on canvas showing, on left, St. Augustine and, on right, possibly, St. Nicholas of Tolentino (San Nicolás de Tolentino)

Estando preñada la Señora Panchita Tabares se tronpeso y se cayó y se pego en la barriga y se bio grabe. Su ermana la encomendo a Padre Jesus y salio bien su criatura por lo que da infinitas gracias en este retablito. San Andres Chalchicomula 1907

While pregnant, Señora Panchita Tabares slipped and fell and suffered a serious injury to her stomach. Her sister prayed to Our Lord Jesus and the baby was born without a problem. For which thanks are given in this humble retablo. San Andrés Chalchicomula 1907





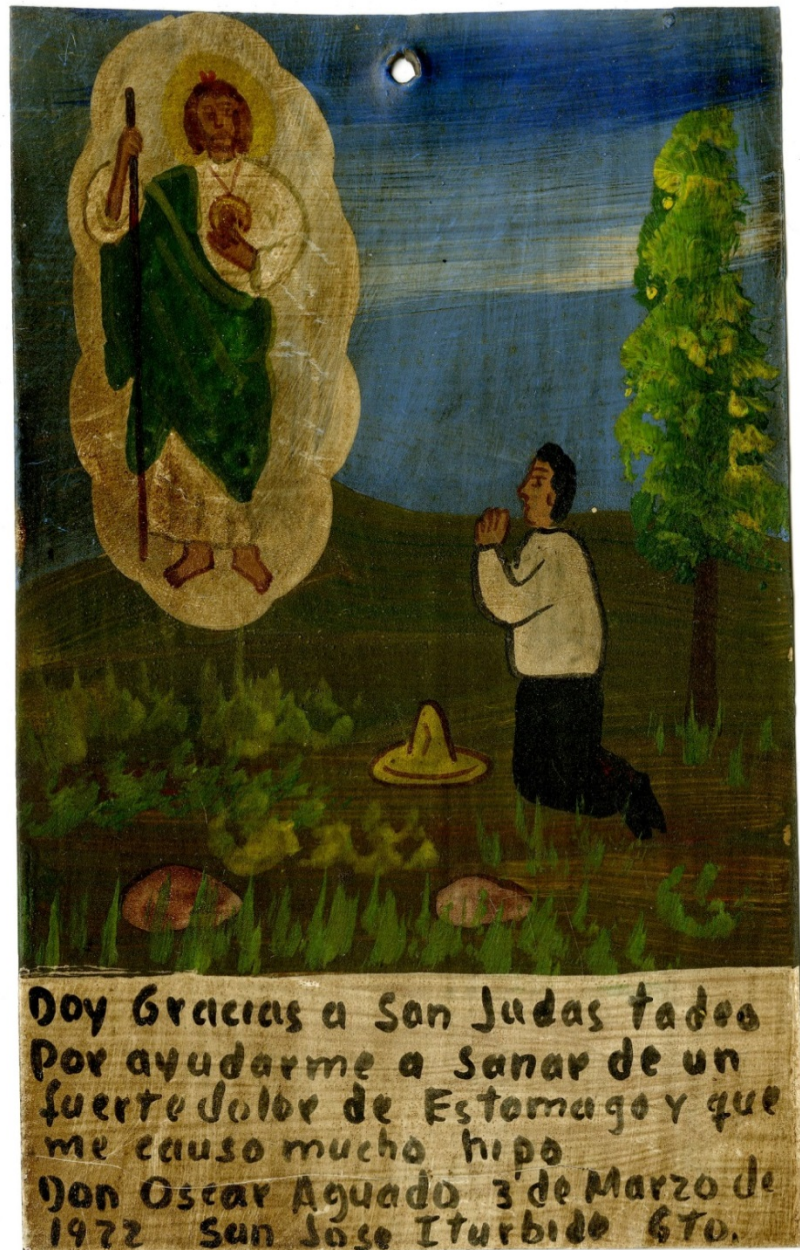
Estando preñada la Señora Teodora Chaves una mala persona le iso brujeria y se vio muy gravida y como ninguna medesina le favoresia sus tatas la encomendaron al Señor de Chalma y recupero su salu y parió bien a su crio por lo que pone este retablito dando infinitas gracias. Puebla 1910

While pregnant, an evil person cast a spell on Señora Teodora Chaves and she fell severely ill. And as no medicine was working, her parents and grandparents prayed to Our Lord of Chalma and she recuperated her health and gave birth to a healthy baby. For which we offer this humble retablo with infinite thanks. Puebla 1910

Doy gracias a San Judas Tadeo por
ayudarme a sanar de un fuerte dolor de
estomago y que me causo mucho hipo.
Don Oscar Aguado, 3 de marzo de
1922. San Jose Iturbido Gto

*I give thanks to San Judas Tadeo for
helping me recover from a severe pain
in the stomach which caused me to
hiccup a lot.*

*Don Oscar Aguado, 3 March 1922 San
José Iturbido, Guanajuato*



Doy Gracias a San Judas Tadeo
por ayudarme a sanar de un
fuerte dolor de Estomago y que
me causo mucho hipo
Don Oscar Aguado 3 de Marzo de
1922 San Jose Iturbido Gto.

Por medio de este retablo agradezco a
mi angel de la guardia ...

*By means of this retablo I thank my
guardian angel ... [illegible]*



[D]a gracias a la S[a]n[ta] Virgen de Loreto [i.e. Loreto] [C]amila Sanchez de un milagro que le iso [a] una niña Soledad Barragas que se ca[llo] enferma y que se desbio del pensamiento y [de] la providencia de Dios y de la Virgen que ...

Camila Sánchez gives thanks to Our Lady of Loreto for a miracle performed on a girl, Soledad Barragas, who fell ill and strayed from the thoughts and providence of God and Our Lady who ...

Note: Period frame obscures some letters and the last line of text.



Mi hijito Raulito se trago una araña que parecía muy venenosa. Por un portentoso milagro de la Santísima Virgen de San Juan a mi niño no le pasó nada grave, solo le dolió el estomago un poco. 3 Mayo 1959

My son Raulito swallowed a spider that seemed to be very poisonous. Through a prodigious miracle by the Virgin of San Juan nothing bad happened to my child; only a small pain in his stomach. 3 May 1959



Mi hijo Raulito se trago una araña que parecía muy venenosa. Por un portentoso milagro de La Santísima Virgen de San Juan a mi niño no le pasó nada grave solo le dolió el estomago un poco. 3 Mayo 1959



En el año de 1955 don Ruperto Ramírez de Gonzaga me anduvo venadeando disque por unos amores mal avidos pero ese 14 de febrero me echo el lazo al pescueso y me anduvo arrastrando por toda la rancheria. Ya medio muerto me encomende a la virgen de Guadalupe que me iso el milagro de salvarme. Doy gracias Toribio García.

In the year 1955 don Ruperto Ramírez de Gonzaga was hunting me down supposedly on account of some ill-advised love affairs but the 14th February he put a rope around my neck and dragged me through the whole village. Already half dead, I commended myself to the Virgin of Guadalupe who saved me through a miracle. I give thanks. Toribio García.

Jacinto Robledo pidió a San Juditas
que ya no lo desvelara el canijo gato en
agradecimiento del favor recibido pone
el presente retablito. Cholula 1921

Jacinto Robledo asked San Juditas to
stop the damn cat from waking him
before dawn and offers this humble
retablo as thanks for the favor received.
Cholula 1921

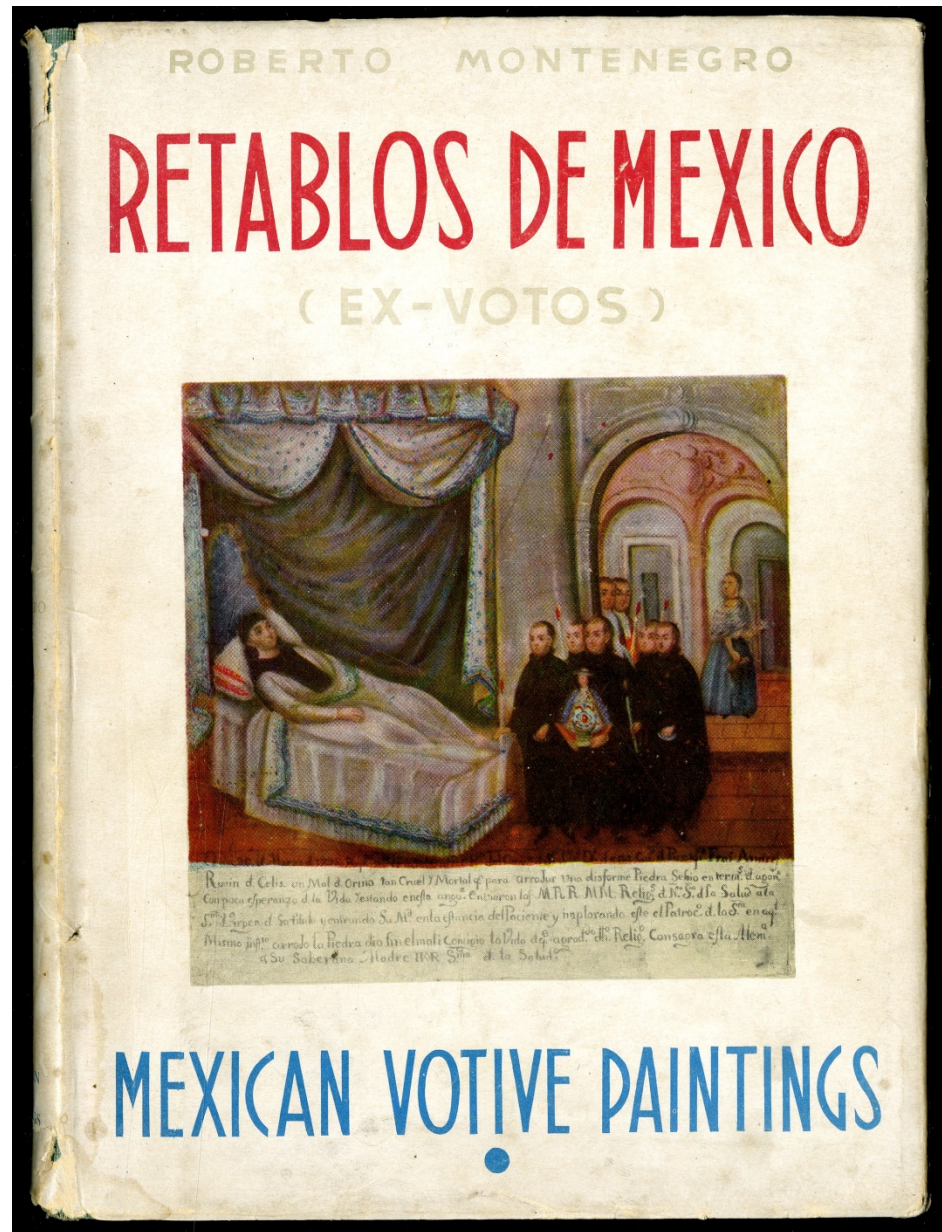


Suggested reading

Retablos de México (ex-votos) :
Mexican Votive Paintings.

Roberto Montenegro.

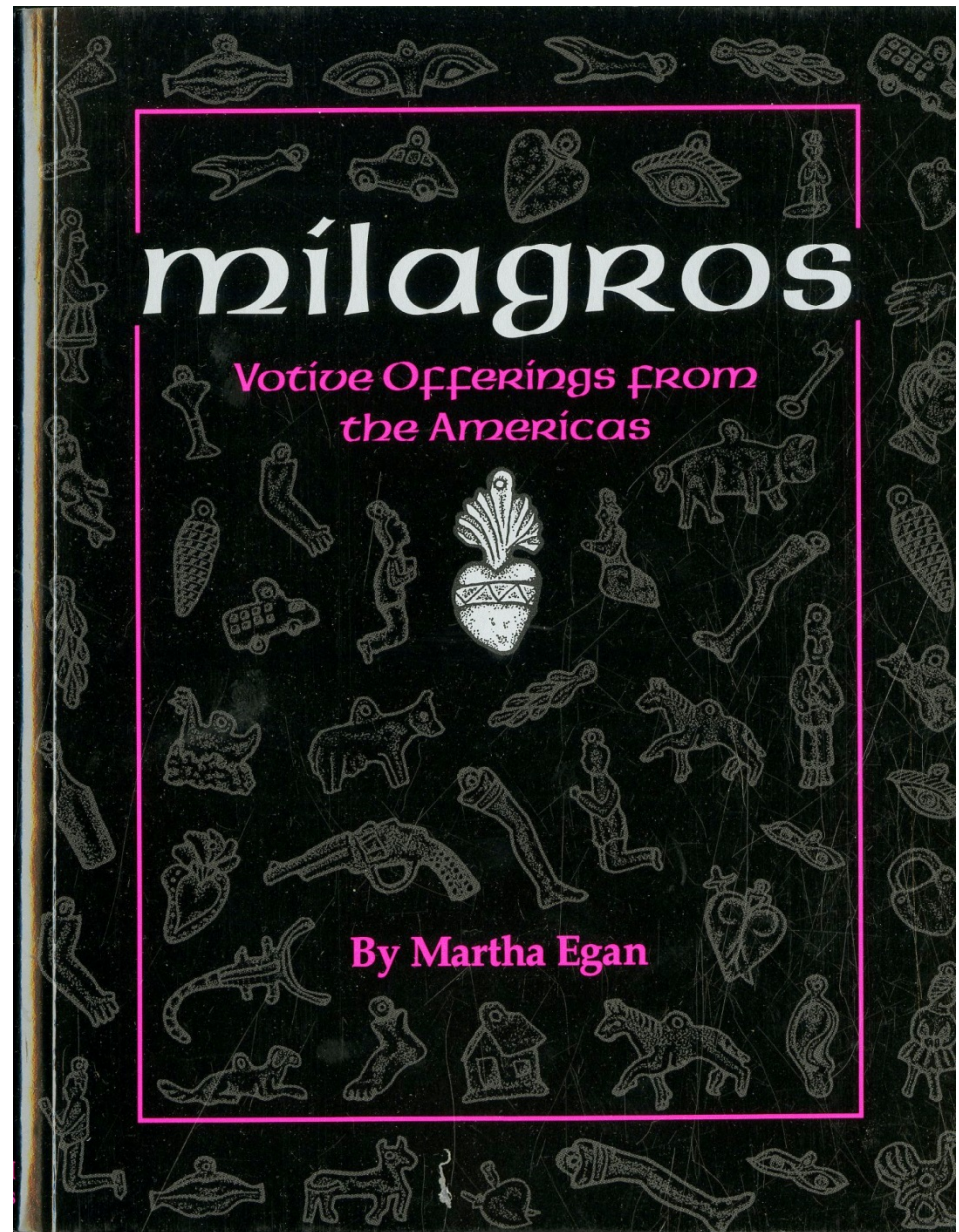
Mexico City: Ediciones
Mexicanas, 1950.



Milagros: Votive Offerings from the Americas.

Martha Egan.

Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1991.



The Art of Private Devotion:
Retablo Painting
of Mexico

*The Art of Private Devotion:
Retablo Painting of Mexico.*

Gloria Fraser Giffords

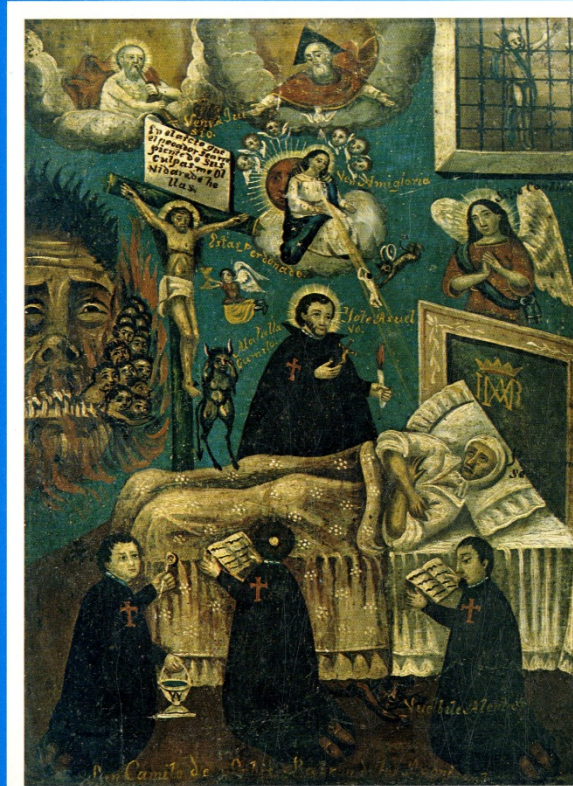
Dallas: Meadows Museum, 1991.



*Mexican Folk Retablos:
Masterpieces on Tin.*

Gloria Kay Giffords.

Tucson: University of
Arizona Press, 1974.



Mexican Folk Retablos

Masterpieces on Tin

Gloria Kay Giffords

*Retablos, prestigio y dinero:
talleres y mercado de pintura en
la Valencia del gótico
internacional.*

Matilde Miquel Juan.

Valencia: Universitat de Valencia,
2008.

Matilde Miquel Juan

Retablos, prestigio y dinero

Talleres y mercado de pintura
en la Valencia del gótico internacional



PUV

El arte de dar gracias: los ex votos de María del Rosario de Talpa.

The Art of Giving Thanks: The Pictorial Ex Votos of María del Rosario of Talpa.

Elin Luque Agraz

Mexico City : Editorial Lamm, 2014.



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