

Cite this article: Mark A. Castro, “Looking Beyond Scholarship to Community Well-Being,” in “American Art History in the Time of Crises” Colloquium, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2021), doi.org/10.24926/24716839.11907.

Looking Beyond Scholarship to Community Well-Being

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Museums and other cultural institutions are just beginning to grapple with the long-term effects of the pandemic. In those first few months, the immediate changes to my work as a curator were quite clear—an inability to travel to research works of art, adjusting to interacting with my colleagues over Microsoft Teams, and other accommodations. I do not want to minimize the impact of these changes, which certainly had a substantial effect on my day-to-day experiences. It is also worth noting that some of the differences have proven to be positive. For example, the turn toward the creation and sharing of digital content has opened new avenues for learning and engagement.

Nevertheless, these effects feel insignificant compared to deeper questions that the past year has raised. Will museums ever again be a place where large numbers of people can gather to experience works of art? Do we want them to be? Is there an alternative model for our institutions that is not so coupled with attendance numbers?

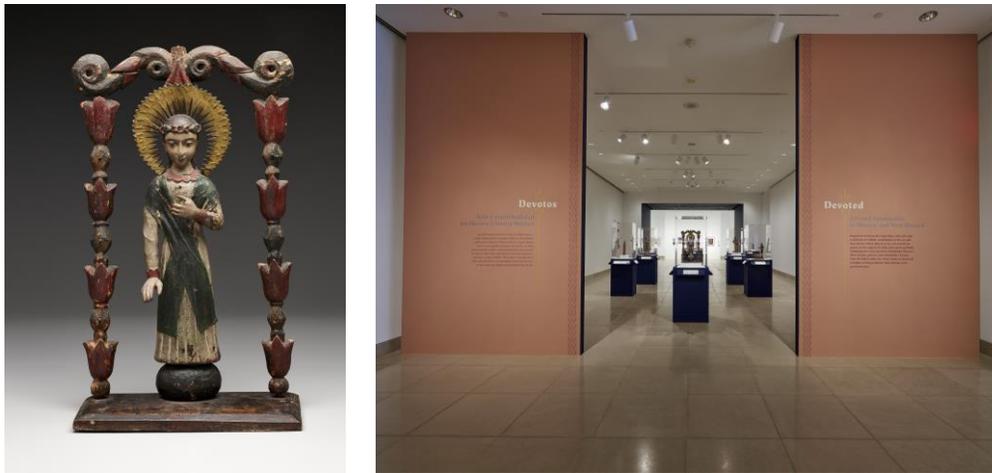
Even more profound, what is the role of museums given the national conversation about American identity and social justice in the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and too many others? What does it mean for museums to acknowledge that we have never been, or can be, neutral in those conversations? Or to grapple with the fact that we are not immune to the systems of inequity that infect countless social and cultural institutions across this country? Collectively, I think we are only beginning to fully comprehend the impact of these questions, and I have found myself humbled by the work left for me to do to fully understand them.

At the same time, this past year has renewed my belief in certain core ideas that first compelled me to become an art historian and curator. Among the most important to me is a belief in the power of art, as well as in a museum’s ability to create engaging and thought-provoking experiences for its communities. In the past year, as I returned again and again to these core values, I have seen some glimmers of how I could meaningfully alter my own curatorial practice and hopefully enact positive changes.

Just a few weeks into the Texas shutdown in the spring of 2020, I began planning an exhibition for our rotating exhibition space for Latin American art. I was inspired by the museum’s rich collection of historical examples of New Mexican *bultos* (fig. 1), a type of carved wood sculpture depicting saints, the Virgin Mary, Christ, and other holy figures. First developed in Spanish settler and Indigenous communities in the late eighteenth century, *bultos* are kept in both churches and private homes. They function as intermediaries between the faithful seeking intercession and the sacred figures they embody. One of the

things that caught my attention was that bultos are often placed by the bedsides of the sick, in the hope that they will safeguard them and bring about healing.

I was excited that this project could offer an opportunity for me to deepen my understanding of these objects and their place in our collection. As I delved further into the subject matter, I found myself drawn to its potential to do more than simply educate our visitors about this artistic tradition. Following the traumatic experiences of the past year, I hoped the exhibition could transform these galleries into a meditative space for reflection, surrounding visitors with objects that offer a sense of protection and healing.



Figs. 1, 2. Left: Attributed to José Rafael Aragón, *Saint Rosalia of Palermo*, early to mid-nineteenth century. Wood, gesso, paint, cloth, metal alloy, and hide, 25 3/8 x 15 x 6 5/8 in. Dallas Museum of Art; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Marcus, 1961.⁵² Courtesy Dallas Museum of Art; photograph by Ira Schank; right: *Devoted: Art and Spirituality in Mexico and New Mexico*, March 7, 2021–January 2, 2022 at the Dallas Museum of Art. Courtesy Dallas Museum of Art; photograph by Chad Redmon

These works are steeped in Catholic tradition, but I felt that by pressing on their function and purpose in our interpretive materials, I could engender the same positive feelings in visitors regardless of their faith. At the same time, bultos continue to be a part of spiritual life in Latinx communities throughout the American Southwest. Many of these communities have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, and perhaps, in a very small way, this exhibition could offer some solace through its exploration of a familiar tradition that is associated with recuperation.

These initial musings evolved over the last year into *Devoted: Art and Spirituality in Mexico and New Mexico* (fig. 2), which opened in February 2021. The exhibition features historical and modern bultos, as well as works from related traditions, many of which also have connections to healing. A bulto depicting Saint Rosalia of Palermo, a saint invoked in times of plague, stands guard at the entrance of the gallery.

The success of the exhibition, however one chooses to define it, remains to be seen, but the experience of putting it together against the backdrop of these complex times has changed my perspective. For me, going forward, I think it has become imperative to look beyond scholarship alone and consider what an exhibition or project can offer to the well-being of the communities we serve. Although I feel there is still a great deal of work for me to do to understand how to effectively put this into practice, this recent experience has still given me a renewed sense of hope that my work can have a positive impact.