

# **William H. Helfand collection of ex-votos and devotional paintings on medical subjects**

**Ms. Coll. 1219**

**Finding aid prepared by Siel Agugliaro.**

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University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts

2016 June 9

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## Summary Information

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| <b>Repository</b>       | University of Pennsylvania: Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts  |
| <b>Creator</b>          | Helfand, William H.  |
| <b>Title</b>            | William H. Helfand collection of ex-votos and devotional paintings on medical subjects   |
| <b>Call number</b>      | Ms. Coll. 1219   |
| <b>Date [inclusive]</b> | 1868-2002  |
| <b>Extent</b>           | 61 item  |
| <b>Language</b>         | English  |
| <b>Abstract</b>         | <p>A gift of historian of pharmacy and medicine Dr. William H. Helfand, this collection of ex-votos and devotional paintings on medical subjects offers insight into Mexican religious folk practices. Ex-votos are votive paintings usually hung in churches and religious venues as a sign of gratitude for received blessings or healings. The collection includes ex-votos dated between 1868 and 2002 and dedicated to Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, Saint Anthony of Padua, Saint James the Moor-slayer, Saint Paschal Baylon, Saint Barbara, Saint Judas Thaddeus, Saint Nicholas, and Saint Cosmas.</p> |

**Cite as:**

William H. Helfand collection of ex-votos and devotional paintings on medical subjects, 1868-2002,

MS. Coll. 1219, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania

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## Biography/History

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Dr. William H. Helfand has degrees in Chemical Engineering (University of Pennsylvania, 1948) and Pharmacy (Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science, 1952), as well as honorary degrees of Doctor of Sciences (Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science, 1976), and Doctor of Humane Letters (Albany College of Pharmacy, Union University, 1981). For more than three decades he worked as an executive manager for the multinational pharmaceutical company Merck & Co., until he retired in 1987. A historian of pharmacy and medicine, he is the author of many publications on these subjects, including the books *Medicine & Pharmacy in American Political Prints* (1978), *Pharmacy: An Illustrated History* (1990, with David L. Cowen), and several articles and catalogues of exhibitions on pharmacy and medicine prints, posters and ephemera. Helfand is himself a collector of medicine and pharmacy-related material, and exhibitions of his posters, illustrations, and prints have been hosted at the Philadelphia Museum of Arts, the New York State Museum, and the National Library of Medicine, among other venues. Helfand has donated his collections to research institutions such as the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscripts at Duke University (William H. Helfand Collection of Medical Prints and Posters, 1695-1991; Helfand Collection of Medical and Pharmaceutical Advertising, 1978-2000), and the Grolier Club (William H. Helfand Bookplate Collection, 1776-1993).

A gift of Dr. William H. Helfand, this collection of ex-votos and devotional paintings on medical subjects offers insight into Mexican religious folk practices, especially during the 20th century. Ex-votos are votive paintings usually hung in churches and religious venues as a sign of gratitude for received blessings or healings. Public offerings of symbolic objects in response to the benevolence of the divinity are common in Europe and their origins may be traced back to the ancient Greeks. In Mexico, votive customs had existed even before the arrival of the Spanish, but a figurative tradition emerged only in the 16th century, with the dissemination of Marian cults promoted by European evangelists. Until the end of the 18th century, the offering of votive paintings was usually practiced by wealthier worshippers. However, after Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821, the tradition was gradually appropriated by the lower classes. With this social shift came a corresponding change in the ex-votos themselves. In the 19th century, tin replaced the expensive canvas that had previously been used, and local, unschooled painters began to specialize in this kind of production, gradually developing personal styles. Until recently, however, the makers of ex-votos have remained largely anonymous, as if to privilege the miraculous event being presented over artistic individuality.

From a spatial perspective, ex-votos are normally organized in three horizontal bands. The spiritual figure being invoked is found in the upper part of the painting, while a description of the miracle performed is provided at the bottom. The miracle itself, or, more frequently, the difficult situation in which the worshippers found themselves before the divine intervention, occupies the central part of the ex-voto. While the holy figures on the top could be copied from traditional sources, the receivers of the blessing are usually portrayed in a simple manner, with scarce attention to physical likeness, and are often organized in hierarchical order, in order to be easily recognized by the viewer – who in turn was very

likely to be another worshipper, given the location in which ex-votos were displayed. Health-related miracles are among the most common found in Mexican ex-votos, together with miracles associated with surviving car accidents, earthquakes, animal attacks, and other violent events.

Like the contemporary production of retablos – religious paintings on tinsplate, usually depicting Jesus, the Virgin Mary, or other saints – the production of ex-votos also declined in the 20th century, although to a lesser extent, the practice still survives today. In the same decades, Mexican artists such as Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Gabriel Fernández Ledesma, and Roberto Montenegro came to see ex-votos as a pure form of art, independent from academic influences, and in some cases they even employed them as a source of inspiration for their own works. Kahlo and Rivera were also among the first collectors of ex-votos. Today, several private collectors and museums include these votive paintings in their collections and exhibitions, both in Mexico and abroad.

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## Scope and Contents

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The William H. Helfand collection of ex-votos and devotional paintings on medical subjects includes six different series, each dedicated to a specific religious figure or to a group of saints: Jesus Christ and the Trinitarian person, the Virgin Mary, Saint Anthony of Padua, Saint James the Moor-slayer, Saint Paschal Baylon, and other saints (Saint Barbara, Saint Judas Thaddeus, Saint Nicholas, Saint Cosmas, Saint Roch). The collection consists exclusively of Mexican ex-votos painted on tin or other metal sheets, although a portrait of Saint Roch on wood, possibly from Colombia, is also included (series VI). In the finding aid, the original Spanish definition of the venerated figure has been retained for every item in the collection, in order to allow for the identification of specific cults and customs. Since most of the ex-votos include the date and location in which they were painted, the relationship between the religious figures and the illnesses being cured may be enriched by possible hypotheses on the geographical areas and the chronological periods in which specific cults were diffused.

Series I consists of 16 ex-votos relating to Jesus Christ and the Trinitarian person, and dated from 1878 to 2002. Among them are found votive paintings dedicated to the Holy Ghost (Espiritu Santo), the Holy Infant of Atocha (Santo Niño de Atocha), and other variations of the cult surrounding the figure of Christ, such as Padre Jesus, Señor de Chalma and Señor de los Rayos. The symptoms, illnesses and injuries being cured include fever, nausea, chest pain, heel pain, pneumonia, smallpox, and rubella, as well as the ill consequences of a poorly administered bloodletting, the bite of a pinacate beetle, and intestinal parasites.

Series II includes 26 ex-votos dating from 1868 to 2000 and dedicated to several different titles of the Virgin Mary, including the Virgin of Guadalupe (12 ex-votos), the Virgin of the San Juan de los Lagos (7), and the Virgin of Zapopan (4). The Virgin is credited for having healed her worshippers of fever, pneumonia, measles, and narcolepsy, or for having given them the strength to overcome drug addictions, to recover after complicated surgeries, or to complete their medical studies. Comical undertones may sometimes be found. In a 1923 ex-voto, the Virgin of Guadalupe is given thanks for having healed a man's hangover. In another, a woman is grateful to the Virgin of Zapopan that her husband is no longer narcoleptic, although now he is awake at night and she is the one to have difficulty sleeping. Similar examples offer researchers the opportunity to assess the fluid boundary between heterodoxy and iconoclasm in Mexican folk religious practices.

Series III contains 5 ex-votos dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua, and dated from 1903 to 1980. Possibly in connection with the saint's traditional association with the infant Jesus, who regularly appears in St. Anthony's arms in all the items of this series, two ex-votos express gratitude after the children of the

painting's commissioners have recovered their health – respectively, after having contracted pneumonia, and after an ankle operation. Other receivers of the saint's blessings include a man who successfully underwent stomach surgery, a woman who recovered after having suffered a spillage of bile, and a future husband whose life was spared after he had an embolic stroke at his wedding altar.

Series IV is devoted to St. James the Moor-slayer. In one of the 4 ex-votos of this series, painted between 1910 and 1934, Santiago – who in the traditional iconography is portrayed astride a white horse – is credited with having healed a man bitten by a horse. Two other ex-votos are related to physical injuries, one which prevented the victim from working the land; in another, the saint is given thanks after a woman recovered from a cold.

Series V is dedicated to Saint Paschal Baylon, patron saint of the kitchen and of cooks. All 4 of the ex-votos in this series, dated between 1923 and 1939, present a kitchen setting; and the kitchen itself, as well as the theme of food in general, often appear in the description at the bottom of these paintings. In one of them, a woman was able to lose weight after the saint's intervention. In another, a mother was cured from mastalgia, and could again breastfeed her children. References to specific historical circumstances surface in an ex-voto painted during the Cristero War of 1926 to 1929, in which the saint is remembered for having assisted a woman in curing a wounded rebel who had found shelter in her kitchen. In all the ex-votos the saint is referred to as "San Pascualito," a possible connection to the heterodox tradition of San Pascualito, particularly diffused in Mexico and Guatemala and not authorized by the Roman Church.

Series VI includes the ex-votos of the collection dedicated to Saint Barbara, Saint Judas Thaddeus, Saint Nicholas, and Saint Cosmas. Some of the ex-votos show a connection between the miracle being accomplished and the kind of protection associated with the venerated saint. Saint Judas Thaddeus, patron saint of desperate cases, is given thanks for having cured one man of rheumatism, and another of a fever that had kept him in bed for a long time. An ex-voto expresses gratitude to Saint Cosmas, patron of physicians, for having helped a nurse be transferred to another hospital unit. Another ex-voto, painted during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), is dedicated to Saint Nicholas, patron of children, who helped a pregnant woman to give birth after having been frightened by a group of Carrancistas (followers of the revolutionary leader Venustiano Carranza). The series also includes a portrait on wood of Saint Roch, possibly from Colombia and dated around 1875.

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## Administrative Information

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University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts

2016 June 9

Finding aid prepared by Siel Agugliaro.

### Access Restrictions

This collection is open for research use.

### Use Restrictions

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### **Source of Acquisition**

Gift of Dr. William H. Helfand, 2015

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## **Related Materials**

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### **Related Archival Materials note**

At the Grolier Club: William H. Helfand Bookplate Collection, 1776-1993. At the Perkins Library, Duke University: William H. Helfand collection of medical prints and posters, 1695-1991, and Helfand Collection of Medical and Pharmaceutical Advertising, 1978-2000 and n.d.

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## **Controlled Access Headings**

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### **CORPORATE NAME(S)**

- Catholic Church.

### **FORM/GENRE(S)**

- Devotional literature
- Paintings (visual works)

### **SUBJECT(S)**

- Art
- Christian art and symbolism

- Figurative art, Latin American
- Folk art--Mexico
- Folk religion
- Medicine--Mexico
- Religion
- Votive offerings
- Votive offerings in art

## Collection Inventory

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### I. JESUS CHRIST AND TRINITARIAN PERSON.

|  | Item |
|--|------|
| "Espiritu Santo", Luz Maria Enriquez Sáenz gives thanks for having healed her son Jose Luis, undated.  | 1    |
| "Padre Jesus", testimony of the help received by Cirilo Tinoco who was cured from nausea, Saltillo, 1933.  | 2    |
| "Padre Jesus", testimony of the help received by the daughter of Dominga Lopes who was cured from heel pain, San Agustin Tlaxco, circa 1937.           | 3    |
| "Padre Jesus", testimony of the help received by Florentino Mandujano who was healed after he had been bitten by a pinacate beetle, San Nicolas, 1937. | 4    |
| "Santo Niño de Atocha", Meliton Ramirez gives thanks for healing his son Nicanor Ramirez from chest pain, Morelia, 1950 November 4.                    | 5    |
| "Santo Niño de Atocha", testimony of the help received by Casilda Salgado who was able to lose weight after her latest pregnancy, undated.             | 6    |
| "Señor Aparecido", testimony of the help received by Francisco Javier who recovered after a long illness, 1948 November 25.                            | 7    |
| "Señor Crucificado", Caceano Ramirez gives thanks for having been healed from his illness, "Puerto B. Nvo. Leon" [possibly Nuevo Leon], 1878.          | 8    |
| "Señor de Chalma", testimony of the help received by Casimira Trejo who was healed after a bloodletting had gone wrong, Santa Catarina, 1915.          | 9    |

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|--|----|
| "Señor de Chalma", testimony of the help received by the husband of Jacoba Ruis who no longer suffers from seizures, Santa Ana Chiautempan, 1917.                                | 10 |
| "Señor de Chalma", testimony of the help received by the husband of Roberta Juarez who recovered from his illness, "San Nicolas", 1935.  | 11 |
| "Señor de la Misericordia", Raul Yañez Servin gives thanks for having been healed from pneumonia, Guanajuato, 1975 January 17.   | 12 |
| "Señor de la Misericordia", testimony of the help received by Lupita Merlo who recovered from her illness, Puebla, 2002 March 20.  | 13 |
| "Señor de los Rayos", testimony of the help received by Tamara Cobarrubias from Boquilla de Santa Rosa who recovered from smallpox, 1914.  | 14 |
| "Señor de los Rayos", testimony of the help received by the son of Regino Martinez from the town Junta de los Cardos who recovered from rubella, Totatiche area, circa 1921.     | 15 |
| "Señor Jesus Diosito", testimony of the help received by the son of Gregoria Menendes who was cured from fever and intestinal parasites, "Gadereyta" [possibly Cadereyta], 1937. | 16 |

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## II. VIRGIN MARY.

|   | Item |
|---|------|
| "Virgen de Guadalupe', Dominga Melgarejo caught a fever after she took a bath at night but she recovered after her brothers had prayed to the Virgin, Cholula, 1907.                | 17   |
| "Virgencita de Guadalupe", testimony of the help received by Erodio Martinez who recovered from pneumonia after his wife and his children had prayed to the Virgin, Tlaxcala, 1915. | 18   |
| "Virgensita de Guadalupe", testimony of the help received by the daughter of Juanita  | 19   |

Rodriguez who recovered after she had been bitten by a pinacate beetle in her eye, Chihuahua, 1917.

"Virgencita de Guadalupe", testimony of the help received by Tereso Garcia who recovered after a lingering hangover after his aunt and his mother prayed to the Virgin, Tlaxcala, 1923. 20

"Virgen de Guadalupe", testimony of the help received by the son of Conception Lozano whose illness was cured by a doctor who had come after she and her husband had prayed to the Virgin, Mexico City, circa 1923. 21

"Virgencita de Guadalupe", testimony of the help received by Baldomero Godimer who gave up drinking after his wife had prayed to the Virgin, Apizaco, 1928. 22

"Virgensita de Guadalupe", testimony of the help received by Severino Espinosa who used to waste his youth and drink toloache but was able to recover after his grandmother had entreated him to the Virgin, Atzizintla [possibly Atzizintla], 1932. 23

"Madre mia de Guadalupe", Juan Jose Lopéz Ramirez's mother gives thanks healing him of from measles, "Mexico D. F." [Mexico City], 1943 September 30. 24

"Madre mia de Guadalupe", Isabel Cruz gives thanks for having been given another opportunity to live after complications during her appendectomy, Puebla, 1957 April 3. 25

"Virgen de Guadalupe", Teresa Morales Luna gives thanks to the Virgin for having healed her husband who had fallen on a rock and had a broken rib, Guanajuato, 1960 August 10. 26

"Virgencita de Guadalupe", Lucha Vidal gives thanks after her husband Tivurcio had a successful head surgery, Cuojimalpa, Mexico City, 2000 December 12. 27

"Virgen de Guadalupe", mother gives thanks for healing her son who suffered from fever and hallucinations, undated. 28

"Virgen del Hospital", Soledad Merlos gives thanks for healing her father who was seriously ill, "Taximaroa" [Ciudad Hidalgo], 1906 July 6. 29

"Virgencita de Juquila", testimony of the help received by Juaquina Lopez who recovered 30

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from tertian fever after having prayed to the Virgin on August 10 1915, Tlaxcala, 1915.

"Maria Santissima de San Juan", testimony of the help received by Don Buenaventura Marques whose ulcer was healed after he had entrusted himself to the Virgin on October 8 1888, Purisima del Rincón area, 1908 February 2. 31

"Virgencita de San Juan", testimony of the help received by Lupe Coyotzi whose eye bump disappeared after her mother prayed to the Virgin, Chiautempan, 1921. 32

"Virgen Santissima de San Juan de Los Lagos", Petra Gonzales gives thanks for having healed her husband who was seriously ill, Aguascalientes, 1942 November 23. 33

"Virgensita de San Juan de Los Lagos", Jose Trinida Ernandes gives thanks for having been healed from nausea and side pain, Puebla, 1942. 34

"Virgen de San Juan de Los Lagos" Salvador Enriquez Hernandez gives thanks for having been healed of his illness, "Guad.", 1953 or 1963 September. 35

"Nuestra Señora de San Juan", a woman gives thanks for having healed her husband from narcolepsy, undated. 36

"Virgen de San Juan", a woman gives thanks for healing her husband and her three children from measles, undated. 37

"Nuestra Señora del Rosario de Toyagua" [Toyahua],testimony of the help received by Josefa Pedroza who recovered from fever and side pain after her daughter Trinidad Roque had made a petition to the Virgin on February 8 1868, May 6 1868. 38

"Virgen de Zapopan", a doctor gives thanks for having been given the strength to complete medical studies, undated. 39

"Virgen de Zapopan", a man gives thanks because his wife has stopped sleepwalking, undated. 40

"Virgen de Zapopan", testimony of the help received by Severiana Lopez who recovered from fever and hallucinations, undated. 41

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"Nuestra Señora de Zapopan", testimony of the help received by Florinda Rios who was allowed by the Virgin to live after her soul had temporarily abandoned her body during her illness, undated. 42

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### III. SAINT ANTHONY OF PADUA.

|   | Item |
|---|------|
| "San Antonio", testimony of the help received by Bartolo Romero who recovered after stomach surgery, 1903 April 22.   | 43   |
| "San Antonio", Luz Gusman gives thanks for having been healed from an illness provoked by a spillage of bile, 1914 April.   | 44   |
| "Señor San Antonio", Remedios Mendoza gives thanks for having healed her boyfriend who had an embolic stroke at their wedding altar, Morelia, 1948 February 11.   | 45   |
| "San Antonio de Padua", Antonia Tura gives thanks for healing her daughter of pneumonia, 1960 June 29.  | 46   |
| "Señor San Antonio", Javier Tellez gives thanks for healing his daughter after an ankle surgery she had in Queretaro on March 7 1980, Pedro Escobedo, circa 1980. | 47   |

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### IV. SAINT JAMES THE MOOR-SLAYER.

|  | Item |
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| "Santiguito", testimony of the help received by Marsela Carmona who recovered from her cold after her husband had prayed to the saint, Tlaxcala, 1910. | 48   |

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|--|----|
| "Santiaguito", testimony of the help received by Ramiro Mendoza whose hand was healed after he was bitten by a horse, Tehuacán, 1916.  | 49 |
| "Santiaguito", testimony of the help received by Toribio Romero who was healed after he injured his back while carrying a heavy load, Cholula, 1920.                           | 50 |
| "Santiaguito", testimony of the help received by Anacleto Aguatzin whose injured leg was healed after his wife entrusted him to the saint, "Tepiaca" [possibly Tepeaca], 1934. | 51 |

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**V. SAINT PASCHAL BAYLON.**

|  | Item |
|--|------|
| "San Pacualito", testimony of the help received by Gudelia Mendoza who recovered from pneumonia, Puebla, 1923.   | 52   |
| "San Pascualito", circular ex-voto, testimony of the help received by a wounded Cristero who was healed after he had found shelter in Nojera Llego's kitchen, possibly Puebla, circa 1928. | 53   |
| "San Pascualito", testimony of the help received by Ramira Pani who recovered from breast pain and is now able to feed her child, Cholula, 1935.   | 54   |
| "San Pascualito", testimony of the help received by Roberta Garcia who lost weight, Puebla de los Angeles, 1939.   | 55   |

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**VI. OTHER SAINTS.**

Item

|  |    |
|--|----|
| "Santa Barbara", testimony of the help received by Carolina Pardo who recovered from a high fever with hallucinations of her husband transformed into a goat, undated.   | 56 |
| "San Juditas" [Judas Thaddeus], testimony of the help received by Anselmo Cabrera who was healed from rheumatism after his wife had prayed to the saint, Apizaco, 1917.  | 57 |
| "San Judas Tadeo", Julian Cerritos gives thanks for having been healed after a fever had kept him in bed for 15 days, "S. L. P." [possibly San Luis Potosí], 1940 February 4.  | 58 |
| "San Nicolasito" [Saint Nicholas], testimony of the help received by Facunda Marquez who had fallen ill because some Carrancistas had scared her when she was pregnant but recovered after her brother entrusted her to the saint, Puebla, 1917. | 59 |
| Saint Roch, devotional painting on wood, possibly Colombia, circa 1875.  | 60 |
| "San Sosimo" [possibly Saint Cosmas], testimony of the help received by nurse Bartolo Garcia who was transferred to another hospital ward after he had asked the saint to be able to stop giving enemas, Puebla, 1927.                           | 61 |