LATINO
ART & CULTURE

FROM THE SERIES
AMERICA PAST AND PRESENT

Expressions of Social Concern
Encouraged by the victories of the civil rights movement led by activists such as the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., the labor organizer César Chávez began in the early 1960s to protest the unfair treatment of farm workers, the majority of whom were Mexican or Mexican American. In 1963 he and Dolores Huerta founded the United Farm Workers of America (UFW), the first effective national organization to represent agricultural workers and press for political reform. Their efforts galvanized Chicano in California and the Southwest into a potent political force for change. The progress Chávez and Huerta made for agricultural workers inspired Chicano to launch a movement seeking cultural identity and political power. They transformed the word “Chicano,” which in the 1920s had been used pejoratively to refer to a lower-class Mexican immigrant, into a term of empowerment.

While Martin Luther King, Jr., and African-American leaders fueled their civil rights movement with great speeches and texts, Chicanos identified their movement through visual art. Images such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, the United Farm Workers’ eagle, the Mestizo head, and Mexican revolutionary figures became important symbols. Artists associated with the Chicano movement, no matter what their media, shared a common concern for educating and revitalizing their communities, transforming what was perceived as oppression into a positive experience and thus forging a better future for Mexican Americans. Mexican-American artists today remain faithful to this tradition of social consciousness and healing.

OBJECTIVES

1. To recognize and analyze historical and cultural sources that inform social content in works by Latino artists

2. To explain the Chicano movement

The Colorado artist Emanuel Martínez created Farm Workers’ Altar [fig. 23] to celebrate an important event in the Chicano movement. On March 10, 1968, in the fields near Delano, California, César Chávez broke a twenty-five-day fast at a Mass celebrated at this altar. Chávez endured his fast to protest unfair employment practices and substandard living conditions experienced by migrant workers. By ending his hunger strike at a Christian celebration of Mass, Chávez honored the long commitment of religious leaders to social justice.
fig. 23. Emanuel Martinez, Farm Workers’ Altar, 1967, acrylic on mahogany and plywood, 96.9 x 138.5 x 91.4 cm (38 1/8 x 54 1/2 x 36 in.). Gift of the International Bank of Commerce in honor of Antonio R. Sanchez, Sr. Shown here, front and back.
The Mass for which this altar was built was attended by farm workers and civil rights advocates from across the country, as well as by Senator Robert F. Kennedy and other national leaders who were deeply committed to equal opportunities in social services and education.

Martínez painted Pre-Columbian and European symbols and figures on the altar to indicate the Mestizo heritage that Chicanos celebrate. In Catholic belief, the altar is a symbol of Christ’s Last Supper, a place for physical and spiritual nourishment and a reaffirmation of one’s faith. Martínez’ altar is one of the most important icons of the early Chicano movement because of its visual images that represent cultural, social, and economic issues important to La Causa (the cause). Motifs painted on the altar include clasped hands of people from many races working together to bring in the harvest surrounding an abstract black eagle on a red background, the symbol of the UFW. Many workers who attended the Mass in the middle of a field, the site of their labor, would have recognized these symbols. The sun is formed from the Mestizo head image, the central face composed of two profiles representing indigenous peoples and Europeans. These painted images, along with the peace symbol and the crucifix, evoke a sense of unity between social and religious causes and celebrate the diversity and character of humanity.

Chicano artists working at the forefront of their movement also used the poster as a vehicle for social and political change. Posters can be reproduced inexpensively and disseminated widely to draw attention to particular causes or events. The makers of these prints combined direct and easily comprehensible visual images, like those on the Farm Workers’ Altar, with words to make powerful and clear statements.

Xavier Viramontes and Ester Hernández have focused on issues that occupied César Chávez during his struggles for the rights of farm workers [fig. 24]. Viramontes incorporated the image of an Aztec warrior squeezing blood out of grapes in his Boycott Grapes poster [fig. 25]. The United Farm Workers of America started the California grape boycott in 1965 as part of a movement to improve working conditions for field laborers, and the poster called for viewers to join in the protest by refusing to buy grapes from their local grocery stores.
Ester Hernández grew up in the San Joaquin Valley of California where she unknowingly bathed in and drank polluted water and worked in an environment contaminated by pesticides. Questions about the effects of pesticides on agricultural workers prompted her to create *Sun Mad* [fig. 26], the print shown here.

Since World War II, the self-taught graphic artist Carlos Cortéz has been active in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), one of the first labor organizations to organize Mexican-American workers in the Southwest. Much of his art and poetry has been produced for that union’s newspaper. His work is a direct reflection of his dedication to labor issues around the world, with particular emphasis on the concerns of Chicano workers.

Ricardo Flores-Magón was one of the early intellectual and political leaders of the Mexican Revolution. When his activities in opposition to the Mexican government endangered his life, he sought refuge in the United States; he was imprisoned several times for his revolutionary writings and activities while living here in exile in the early 1900s. This portrait [fig. 27] shows a jailed Flores-Magón presenting his criticism of *el arte por el arte mismo* (art for art’s sake), implying that art has a higher purpose as a tool for bringing about social change. The following is a rough translation of the complete statement by Flores-Magón:

> This “art for art’s sake” is absurd, and its defenders have always gotten on my nerves. I feel for art such reverent admiration and love that it pains me to see it prostituted by people who, not having the ability to make others feel what they feel nor think what they think, hide their impotence under the motto of “art for art’s sake.”


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fig. 25. Xavier Viramontes, *Boycott Grapes*, 1973, color lithograph, 55.2 x 40.3 cm (21 3/4 x 15 7/8 in.). Gift of Tomás Ybarra-Frausto

fig. 26. Ester Hernández, *Sun Mad*, 1982, serigraph, 49.5 x 37.4 cm (19 1/2 x 14 3/4 in.). Gift of Tomás Ybarra-Frausto

fig. 27. Carlos Cortéz, Ricardo Flores-Magón, 1978, linocut, 91.4 x 58.7 cm (36 x 23 1/8 in.). Museum purchase
Charles “Chaz” Bojórquez grew up in East Los Angeles where he was continuously exposed to the graffiti of the gangs around him. Somos la Luz (We Are the Light) [fig. 28] combines a variety of writing styles layered one on top of another, simulating successive layers of paint accumulated on a wall. Bojórquez used many subtle tonal variations, ranging from silver gray to black, in creating the textural density of this dynamic composition.

In Somos La Luz, the far lower left corner is incised with the Roman numerals XLIII, which represent Avenue 43, my home street. It’s a symbol of “Place.” The dark letters are the names of the young writers (Zender, Nuke, Duke, Skill, Krenz, etc.) who are changing the legitimacy of graffiti language from the dark underground to the steel strength and light of acceptance.... The steel illustrious letters on the right side of the painting are “Slick,” “Somos La Luz,” and “Hex.”

ACTIVITIES

1. As a class project, talk about a community issue that continues to be a source of concern to your families and neighbors. Select an area that interests you. How would you dramatize the issue visually through a poster? See the Chicano posters in the Study Guide for inspiration.

2. Read John Steinbeck’s 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath* or watch the 1940 film directed by John Ford. Citing characters and incidents from the story, write an essay comparing social and political conditions for tenant farmers in Oklahoma and California in the 1930s with those of migrant farm workers in California during the 1960s. Sources on the 1960s in California include *Latinos: A Biography of the People* by Earl Shorris (New York: Norton, 1992) and chapter 6 of *Mex America: Two Countries, One Future* by Lester D. Langley (New York: Crown, 1988).

3. The use of visual symbols in the *Farm Workers’ Altar* serves a purpose similar to that of the religious artworks made during the medieval period and the Renaissance in Europe—to convey ideas through pictures rather than words. Using the reproduction from your set of prints, carefully study all views of the altar and make a list of the symbols it contains. Write an essay that discusses how Martinez’ use of visual symbols reflects aspects of the movement to improve working conditions for farm laborers.

4. Emanuel Martinez’ *Farm Workers’ Altar* played an important role in the agricultural reform movement in California during the 1960s. Spend a class period discussing how other works of art or design objects have played roles in historical events.

5. Invent a vocabulary of symbols and design a socially significant artwork on an issue or subject that interests you.

6. Another artist active in the Chicano movement is Carmen Lomas Garza, who in 1969 organized a Chicano art show for the first national conference of the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO). Lomas Garza often paints traditional family scenes in which she reestablishes the role of Mexican social and religious traditions. As a group activity with members of your class, organize an event that recognizes and pays tribute to important traditions in your school or community.

7. Photojournalists have been creating visual documentaries of historical events and conditions in the United States since the discovery of photography in the nineteenth century, a tradition exemplified by the early work of Mathew Brady during the Civil War in the 1860s and later by Dorothea Lange’s photo documentation of the Depression in the 1930s. Issues of social significance in this country continue to be explored today. Joseph Rodriguez, a Puerto Rican photographer featured in the video, documents his personal connection to the people, the spirit, and the sense of family in the New York community of Spanish Harlem. Create a photographic essay documenting an aspect of your life or school community that accomplishes similar goals.
ARTISTS’ BIOGRAPHIES

Charles “Chaz” Bojórquez
Painter, born in 1949 in Los Angeles, California. Bojórquez draws his inspiration from his birthplace, where he grew up and still makes his home. He received formal art training at Guadalajara University of Art in Mexico and California State University and Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles. Bojórquez worked as a commercial artist in advertising and film before concentrating on painting.

Carlos Cortéz
Graphic artist, born in 1923 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Cortéz currently lives in Chicago, where he has been active with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) since the end of World War II. His dedication to the IWW, one of the first labor organizations to organize Mexican workers in the southwestern United States, is reflected in Cortéz’ numerous articles, short stories, poems, book reviews, photographs, comic strips, and linoleum-cut illustrations published over the years in the union’s newspaper.

Ester Hernández
Printmaker, born in 1944 in Dinuba, California. In the early 1970s, Hernández settled in the San Francisco Bay area to pursue Chicano studies at Laney College and visual arts at the University of California, Berkeley. Hernández graduated from UC as a dean’s-list student with a degree in Practice of Art. She met other Chicano artists and became associated with Las Mujeres Muralistas, a women’s mural collective. Hernández has received several California Arts Council Artist-in-Residence Grants, as well as teaching in elementary school, college, and senior citizen centers.

Emanuel Martínez
Painter and sculptor, born in 1947 in Denver, Colorado. Martínez attended Metropolitan State College and Juárez Lincoln University in Denver. He currently teaches drawing and painting for the Art Students League of Denver and serves as an advisory committee member for the Denver School for the Arts and the Colorado Historical Society. Martínez is a past recipient of the Governor’s Award for Excellence in the Arts in Colorado.

Xavier Viramontes
Printmaker, born in 1943 in Richmond, California. Viramontes received a B.F.A. from San Francisco Art Institute and an M.A. from San Francisco State University. The recipient of numerous printmaking awards, he has taught printmaking classes at all levels at City College, F.M. Mason and Phelan campuses, in San Francisco since 1980.