

Art for *La Causa*

The civil rights era of the 1960s, in which marginalized groups demanded equal rights, dramatically altered American society. Galvanized by the times in which they lived, Latino artists became masters of socially engaged art, challenging prevailing notions of American identity and affirming the mixed indigenous, African, and European heritage of Latino communities. Many artists reinvigorated mural and graphic traditions in an effort to reach ordinary people where they lived and worked. Whether energizing genres like history painting, or creating activist posters or works that penetrated bicultural experiences, Latino artists shaped and chronicled a turning point in American history.

The Latino Civil Rights movement began around the same time as the African American Civil Rights movement during the 1960s. The Latino community founds its voice in civil rights activist **Cesar Chavez** in their quest for equality. Chavez, inspired by **Gandhi** and **Martin Luther King Jr.**, implemented peaceful protest strategies in the effort to expand civil and labor rights for Latinos. The marches, strikes, and fasts that Chavez and others employed aided in raising awareness of unfair labor practices, such as low wages and poor working conditions facing the Latino community. These issues became compelling motivation for Latino artists to use their talents to raise awareness and engage others for ***La Causa***. Their artwork, which began as an expression of public art forms, fueled ongoing political activism and a greater sense of cultural pride. Political banners and posters carried during marches and protests were some of the first art forms of the movement. While Emanuel Martinez's *Farm Workers Altar* is an excellent example of early public art of the movement, Carmen Lomas Garza's *Camas para Sueños* exudes cultural pride in depicting a scene of everyday life in a Mexican American family.

Farm Workers' Altar

This altar was used during the celebration of Catholic Mass in 1968 when Cesar Chavez broke a twenty-eight day fast to protest the working conditions of migrant agricultural workers. This fast was the first Chavez undertook during his lifelong struggle against the injustices faced by the greater Latino community. His 1968 fast was in response to a disagreement over Chavez's non-violent protest tactics among his fellow union activists. The disgruntled farm workers believed that Chavez's insistence on peaceful marches and strikes were not an effective way to attain recognition as a union by the crop growers. The workers' non-union unregulated status meant that the crop growers were able to take advantage of them with low wages, long working hours, and unsafe working conditions. Yet, Chavez's perseverance and dedication to the cause inspired many and swayed them to his way of thinking. When Chavez broke his fast

on March 10, 1968, he was joined by ten thousand supporters, including Senator **Robert F. Kennedy** and **National Farm Workers'** co-founder **Dolores Huerta**.



Artist/ activist Emanuel Martinez was inspired by Chavez's passionate speeches and his own Mexican-American heritage to create the imagery on the altar. Martinez incorporated many of the Mexican, Christian, and **pre-Columbian** symbols that were used throughout **el Movimiento** movement on banners, posters, and flyers. He was just twenty-one years old when commissioned by the Episcopal Bishop of Los Angeles for the project. One side of the altar depicts a brown-skinned Jesus Christ; on the opposite side, an

indigenous woman wears a peace symbol, her hands grasping grapes and wheat. The dual-faced sun above her denotes the mixed heritage of Mexican Americans; the union of Spanish and indigenous peoples. The side panels display a cross made from corn cobs and a circle of linked arms with multiple skin tones, representing strength and unity. The symbol of the **United Farm Workers**, a black eagle inside a red circle, is placed inside the circle. For more information on the imagery in *Farm Workers' Altar*, please see **Activity: Observation and Interpretation**.

Martinez had spent years working for the Latino civil rights cause, joining the country's first Chicano civil rights organization **Crusade for Justice**, in Denver, Colorado. Unlike Lomas Garza, whose work is devoted to small, intimate pieces, the bulk of Martinez's artwork is on a large scale, mostly mural paintings for community organizations. In these murals, Martinez incorporates the same symbols of **mestizo** heritage as he did in the *Farm Workers' Altar* - images of pre-Columbian civilizations of Mexico and of past and present historical figures who have contributed to the Mexican and Mexican American struggle for justice. He describes the purpose of his activist artwork as, "aimed at strengthening the unity of our community by encouraging pride and bringing cultural nationalism to the forefront of the **Chicano** civil rights movement. I became committed to this goal and did everything I could to help achieve it."

Camas para Sueños

Like Emanuel Martinez, Chicana artist Carmen Lomas Garza was inspired by the Latino rights movement, responding to social change and discrimination through her artwork. Lomas Garza's paintings address her experiences growing up in the 1950s in an extended Mexican American family on the Texas/ Mexico border. She writes:

Most of my images are recollections of my childhood in South Texas. Relatives and friends are depicted as remembered in everyday activities or in unusual events such as a session with a faith healer or a fight. . . . Every time I paint, it serves a purpose--to bring about pride in our Mexican American culture. When I was growing up, a lot of us were punished for speaking Spanish. We were punished for being who we were, and we were made to feel ashamed of our culture. That was very wrong. My art is a way of healing these wounds.

Within the close-knit Mexican American community of Kingsville, Texas, Lomas Garza received love and encouragement from her family and from a broad range of friends and neighbors. But when she ventured outside the comfort of her community, she experienced prejudice. The **Chicano movement** helped give her new pride in her mixed Native American and Spanish ancestry. She writes: "When I was in high school, the [United Farm Workers] came marching through town. That was really a crucial turning point for the Chicano movement because it brought to life in a very obvious way the inequities. And so I became involved with the Chicano movement as an artist. My answer to answering what I could do within the Chicano movement was to do my artwork." In college she decided to dedicate her art to the Mexican American community to show her gratitude and celebrate her rich *mestizo* heritage. Lomas Garza hoped that by painting positive imagery of Mexican American community life, her art might help eliminate the racism she experienced as a child.



Her works focus on subjects such as the importance of childhood memories and family traditions. Lomas Garza's work is personal and intimate – even the scale of her work is small – inviting the viewer to look closely and engage with community traditions and family interactions depicted in her work. Her 1985 painting *Camas para Suenos* [translation: *Bed for Dreams*] focuses on the dynamics of Mexican American family life. The lower half of the artwork shows a mother providing comfort for her children in the form of a freshly made bed, religious imagery, and a well-stocked chest of drawers. On the roof above her, her daughters lay by the light of the moon, pointing to the stars and dreaming of their future. The artist suggests that the girls' dreams are within reach, especially when their home life has provided them a good foundation.

Glossary

La Causa: Spanish term which translates to “The Cause.” The term is used in reference to the grape boycott led by Cesar Chavez in the 1960s.

Cesar Chavez: (1927-1993) union leader and labor organizer. Founder of the NFWA (later the UFW), Chavez advocated for farm workers’ rights and employed Gandhi’s tradition of peaceful, non-violent social change.

Chicano: a chosen identity of an American of Mexican origin or descent. The term came to prominence during the Chicano movement. Some members of the community view the term with negative connotations, as it was used previously in a derogatory manner.

Chicano movement: a period of widespread social and political activism within the Mexican American community during the 1960s and 1970s; also known as the Chicano Civil Rights Movement.

Crusade for Justice: a Denver, Colorado arm of the Chicano movement, founded in 1967 by political activist Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzalez.

Dolores Huerta: (1930 -) labor leader and civil rights activist, she co-founded what would become the United Farm Workers (UFW) with Cesar Chavez. She continues to be an advocate for workers’, immigrants’, and women’s rights.

Mahatma Gandhi: (1869-1948) Indian political and spiritual leader during India’s struggle for independence from Great Britain. Known for his peaceful, passive, non-violent forms of protest.

Martin Luther King Jr.: (1929-1968) African American civil rights leader and Baptist minister, who rose to prominence fighting the segregation of public transportation. He was an active supporter of Gandhi’s method of peaceful, non-violent social change.

mestizo: Spanish term used to describe a person of mixed European and Amerindian (pre-Columbian) descent.

el Movimiento: Spanish term meaning “The Movement,” used in reference to the Chicano rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

pre-Columbian: this term refers to era comprised of many subdivisions which denotes the vast span of time in the Americas before the arrival and influence of European cultures. The term’s name is derived from Italian explorer Christopher Columbus, so it means quite literally “the time before Columbus,” or before Columbus’ arrival in 1492.



la raza: Spanish term which translates to “the race.” Used by Latinos/ Hispanics to express ethnic pride.

Robert F. Kennedy: (1925-1968) United States Senator, advocate for civil rights. Kennedy joined Chavez at the end of his 1968 fast in support of the movement.

United Farm Workers: (UFW) a labor union of farm workers in the United States. As a result of the commonality of goals between the AWOC and the NFWA, and after a series of strikes in 1965, the groups united to form the UFW in 1966.