



Retablos de Los Altos de Chiapas

San Cristóbal de las Casas and Teopisca, Mexico

Los Altos de Chiapas, or Chiapas Highlands, is a region in southeastern Mexico that comprises 17 municipalities. The area is renowned for its iconic baroque altarpieces, or *retablos*. Most of the altarpieces are located in the missionary churches of San Cristóbal de las Casas, one of the earliest Spanish settlements in the Americas, and neighboring municipalities, including Teopisca. The ornate sixteenth- and seventeenth-century altarpieces are made of carved wood, with gilded and sometimes polychrome surfaces. In some of the earlier churches, like the Templo de San Agustín in Teopisca and San Felipe in San Cristóbal de las Casas, the original retablos were painted on the sanctuary walls using dry tempera, organic binders, and mineral pigments on a lime, sand, and gypsum surface. The carved altarpieces were created later, at a time of prosperity, and replaced the original painted altarpieces.

The ensemble of 36 altarpieces is facing several conservation challenges, including deterioration from moisture, insect invasion, and structural damage. A number of the buildings that house the altarpieces are also in need of conservation. Moreover, these significant artistic monuments are threatened by theft and illicit trafficking of religious property in the region. There is a growing need for enhanced local engagement in the protection of these important religious and architectural features. The inclusion of the Retablos de los Altos de Chiapas on the 2014 Watch will help increase awareness about illicit trafficking, the need to inventory sacred art, and the participation of local communities in the safeguarding of their cultural heritage.