



SANTA BARBARA TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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To Encourage the Preservation of Historic Buildings and Sites in the County of Santa Barbara

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

May 7, 2007

Additional photos available upon request

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FORGED IN IRON: THE EXPRESSIVE ART OF THE ROOF CROSS TRADITION IN CHIAPAS, MEXICO: New exhibit at the Casa de la Guerra traces the fascinating evolution of a regional tradition to its renaissance as a decorative art



(SANTA BARBARA, CA, MAY 7, 2007) – The Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation (SBTHP) presents ***Forged in Iron: The Expressive Art of the Roof Cross Tradition in Chiapas, Mexico*** at the Casa de la Guerra Historic House Museum, Santa Barbara, Calif., May 31 through November 11, 2007. Based on the book “Spirit of Chiapas: The Expressive Art of the Roof Cross Tradition” by **Guest Curator Virginia Ann Guess**, this rare exhibition features examples of **hand-crafted iron crosses, tools used by the skilled ironworkers who create them, and contemporary photographs of the region where the tradition flourishes.**

This extraordinary exhibit of more than 20 iron crosses—spanning a period of 100 years—seeks not only to showcase these incredible examples of folk art, but also to explore the stylistic changes in the iron roof cross tradition in Chiapas, Mexico, by examining the adaptive techniques of the region’s craftsmen. “Forged in Iron” illustrates four stages in the evolution of the craft beginning with the oldest roof crosses designed and created as an expression of a local religious custom, to wall crosses with secular themes and a broader appeal, to stereotypic souvenirs or “Passion Crosses,” and finally, to decorative crosses with refined artistic elements.

Various photographs from the region, along with examples of the ironworker’s basic tools, complement the exhibition and help contextualize the crosses. **“Once removed from its place of origin, folk art loses the intended meaning or importance to those who make or use it. Thus, the photographs, ethnographic**

objects, and ironworker’s tools in the exhibit serve as reminders of the rich cultural context that surrounds the roof cross tradition” notes Guest Curator and Author Virginia Ann Guess.

In the late eighteenth century, ironworkers in the colonial town of San Cristóbal de Las Casas added a visual dimension to the religious practice of blessing a house with the sign of a cross to protect it from unexpected disasters. Each roof cross was individually commissioned, thus different, but based on the Latin cruciform. The ironworkers who created them learned their trade as apprentices without the benefit of formal training. They devoted their craft to meeting the needs of the local community.

Since the twentieth century, Chiapas has been recognized as a site of notable ironwork. In the 1960s as travelers ventured into this southernmost state of Mexico, the ironworkers directed their attention to tourists and collectors of folk art. They designed crosses to hang on the wall rather than as roof ornaments. This began a period of experimentation when they forged a variety of crosses to satisfy the aesthetic values of the buyers rather than to complement a local custom. By the mid 1970s, Chiapas had become a significant tourist destination. Innovative ironworkers again adapted the cross to a larger market of travelers who desired a memento of their trip that identified the region. A stereotypic style developed, often referred to as the “Passion Cross,” that became the standard indicator for metal craft in the region.

In the late 1990s, an industrial arts school opened in San Cristóbal de Las Casas that featured a formal education program in the art of metal work. Here, a new generation of young ironworkers learn their craft from experienced artisans who emphasize the importance of preserving the traditional styles of roof crosses while encouraging students to develop their own innovative techniques.

“This exhibit reflects a unique collaboration between the SBTHP and a gifted writer and scholar to exhibit the fascinating evolution of a regional tradition from its inception as a local religious custom to its current renaissance as a decorative art” says SBTHP Curator Anne Petersen.

Opening Reception:

Wednesday, May 30, 2007

5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

Casa de la Guerra Historic House Museum

15 E. De la Guerra Street, Santa Barbara

Public Welcome

Book signing by Virginia Ann Guess, author of *Spirit of Chiapas: The Expressive Art of the Roof Cross Tradition*. Books available during the reception.

Exhibit Runs:

May 31, to November 11, 2007

Casa de la Guerra Historic House Museum

15 E. De la Guerra Street, Santa Barbara

Thursday - Sunday, Noon to 4:00 p.m.

\$3 General Admission

Free for SBTHP members

ABOUT the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation – Founded in 1963 by Dr. Pearl Chase and other concerned community leaders, the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation works to protect, preserve, restore, reconstruct, and interpret historic sites within Santa Barbara County. The Trust is the primary force in the reconstruction and preservation of El Presidio de Santa Barbara State Historic Park and the restoration of La Casa de la Guerra in downtown Santa Barbara. Most recently, the Trust has begun reconstruction on the Northwest Corner of El Presidio de Santa Barbara, the eighteenth-century Spanish colonial fort that is Santa Barbara's birthplace. These additions will eventually house the new Presidio visitors' center, and with the help of the new Presidio Resource Center, serve to interpret the city's Hispanic heritage, and the larger multi-cultural heritage of the surrounding Presidio neighborhood from the eighteenth century to the present. **For more information visit www.sbthp.org**

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