

# The Virgin of Guadalupe / La Virgen de Guadalupe

National Museum of Mexican Art

## Who is *La Virgen*?

The Virgin of Guadalupe refers to when the Virgin Mary—the mother of Jesus and a very important saint in the Roman Catholic religious tradition—appeared to a man named Juan Diego in Mexico in 1531. She holds a special place in the culture and religious life of many Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Her importance is so great that her image has become a national symbol of Mexico itself.

## The Virgin Appears

According to tradition, the Virgin Mary appeared to Juan Diego, a man of Aztec descent who had converted to Christianity, on December 9, 1531. She asked Juan Diego to build a shrine on the spot where she had appeared, Tepeyac Hill, now in a suburb of Mexico City. The local bishop—an important church official—demanded that Juan Diego provide a sign that would prove the Virgin Mary had really appeared to him before he would agree to build a church on the site. The Virgin Mary appeared to Juan Diego again on December 12 and miraculously showed him where to pick roses, even though it was winter, to take to the bishop as proof that she had really appeared. Juan Diego collected the roses in his cloak, went before the bishop, and then opened his cloak to show him the roses. Dozens of roses fell to the floor and his cloak had a beautiful picture of the Virgin Mary inside. The bishop was stunned by the miracle and ordered that a church be built in her honor on Tepeyac Hill.

## Worshipped throughout the World

Since that time, many people in Mexico have worshipped the Virgin of Guadalupe, as she has come to be called, and her popularity has grown through the centuries. In 1737, many believed she ended a deadly plague that ravaged Mexico City. That same year, she was proclaimed patroness (a saint who protects and leads) of Mexico City. Later she was made patroness of what is now Mexico and parts of modern-day California, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Various popes—who serve as the head of the Roman Catholic Church—have officially recognized her importance for Latin America and even the Philippines in Southeast Asia. Devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe has now spread to many parts of the world.

## A Symbol of Mexico

The Virgin of Guadalupe also played an important role during Mexico's revolt against Spanish rule in 1810. A priest named Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla promoted her as the patroness of the uprising he led against the Spanish. The image of the Virgin of

Guadalupe appeared on the rebels' banners, and their battle cry was "Long Live Our Lady of Guadalupe." During a religious revival in Mexico in the late 1800s, preachers declared that the foundation of Mexico could be dated to the time when the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared, because she freed the people from pre-European religions and united the Spanish and native peoples in a common religion.

Look closely at her image to see elements from both the Aztec and Roman Catholic religions. Golden rays of light shine from behind her to represent the sun, while a crescent moon appears near the Virgin's feet. Notice also the stars that dot her shawl or *rebozo*. These three elements link the Virgin with the indigenous Nahua goddess of the universe, Tonantzin, while the position of her

hands, her stance, and gentle facial expression are similar to many Roman Catholic images of the Virgin Mary.

Emiliano Zapata, a leader in the Mexican Revolution of 1910–20, had his rebels carry the banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe when they entered Mexico City in 1914. During the civil war in Mexico from 1926–29, the banners of the rebels also contained her image. Her strong ties to the nation of Mexico can be seen not only in the way she combines indigenous and European imagery, but also in the wings of the angel at her feet: they look like eagles' wings as they appear on Mexico's flag and contain Mexico's official colors red, green, and white.

## The Virgin of Guadalupe in the U.S.

The ever-growing presence of people of Mexican descent in the United States has meant the Virgin's influence has spread to this country. In the 1960s, César Chávez used the Virgin of Guadalupe during his battle for farmworkers' rights. He and those protesting with him carried the emblem of the Virgin to provide support and to save them from oppression. Mexican American churches throughout the U.S. organize elaborate ceremonies for December 12, the day she appeared, resulting in hundreds of celebrations dedicated to the saint around the country. For Mexican American women, the Virgin represents motherhood, femininity, and sometimes even women's struggle against oppression. Mexican American mural painters have often painted images of the Virgin on neighborhood walls since the late 1960s. Her image appears on t-shirts, key rings, low-rider car hoods, and tattoos, continuing her powerful influence over a period of 450 years. Today, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims visit her shrine every year, lighting candles and leaving flowers in a demonstration of her continued importance as a religious symbol and a symbol of Mexico.

