

# **BOTÁNICA** *Los Angeles*

**Latino Popular Religious Art in the City of Angels**

**PATRICK ARTHUR POLK**

*With contributions by*

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**UCLA FOWLER MUSEUM OF CULTURAL HISTORY  
LOS ANGELES**



# 3

## BOTÁNICAS

### Sites of Healing and Community Support

*Claudia J. Hernández and Michael Owen Jones*

Herbal products for sale in the window of one of many botánicas where we conducted interviews might suggest that this is simply a naturopathic shop. Inside, however, sculptures of African warriors majestically flank the main aisle, prints of Native American healers decorate the walls, dense arrangements of colorful seven-day candles (*veladoras*) bedeck the countertop, and an altar for the Guatemalan folk saint San Simón—complete with offerings of alcohol, flowers, money, and food—sits on the floor in a corner behind the main display case.

The walls of the consultation room, situated immediately behind the sales area, are adorned with images of San Martín de Porres, San Lázaro, Santa Bárbara, and Mexican folk saint Jesús Malverde. An enormous altar fills a third of this consultation area. It features two tall wooden statues of Native American warriors adorned with leathers and rabbit fur, a pair of figurines of Mama Francisca and Negro José, Catholic statues of Santa Bárbara and Nuestra Señora de Misericordia (Our Lady of Mercy), and a seven-day candle depicting Jesús Malverde. A vase containing yellow and orange flowers stands on the left side of the altar, while another holding pink carnations sits on the right side. A small black cauldron with incense is placed near the center in front of a large glass goblet of clear water. A bottle of Florida Water and an egg, which are used in spiritual cleansings, also appear on the table. Clearly this is much more than a retail establishment dispensing homeopathic remedies. It is in fact a locus of the spiritual, and the abundant assortment of sacramental items so richly displayed reflects the needs of the community as well as the spiritual traditions of the owner.<sup>1</sup>

Proprietor Raul Martínez<sup>2</sup> notes that his store's religious affiliation is with Catholicism, Santería,

<sup>3.1</sup> Soap labels. Reproduced with permission of Soydel, Inc., and Indio Products, Inc.

JABON  
EL NIÑO FIDENCIO



JABON DEL  
AJO MACHO



JABON  
9 YERBAS DEL  
INDIO



JABON



JABON DEL  
Destierro



JABON  
DE VEN A MI



JABON



SANTISIMA MUERTE M.R.

JABON DEL  
Chango Macho  
Abre Camino  
ORO Y PLATA  
OFRECIMIENTO



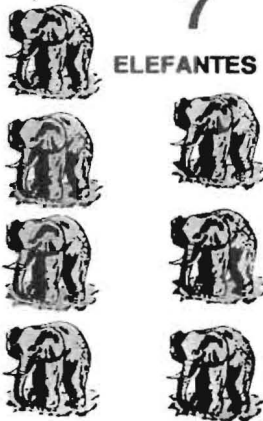
CHANGO MACHO  
ESPIRITU DE LA BUENA  
SUERTE

LEVANTA NEGOCIO

JABON

7

ELEFANTES



JABON DE

JABON



JABON DEL

JABON DE  
HUEVO



De  
Gallina Negra  
PARA  
LIMPIAS

JABON

Quiéreme Siempre



JOROBADO



LA HERRADURA MAGNETICA



and Palo; however, he clarifies, "Before being a *santero*, I am an *espiritista* [Spiritist]. An *espiritista* is born an *espiritista*." Although Martínez divined people's problems as a child, it was not until he was eighteen that he began performing spiritual works and visiting botánicas. He recalls, "When I went to the botánica [it] was because I needed material, I needed to buy duck eggs that they don't sell in the store, I bought different candles that I couldn't find anywhere else, different herbs and incense that you use in [spiritual cleansings], in other words the material needed to do my job."

When Martínez began shopping at botánicas, he developed friendships with store owners who introduced him to their faith and thus helped him develop his spiritual abilities. As he explains, "I always looked younger than I am, and that was of intrigue to people because I would always buy things and know what I was buying, and I always paid them, and I never had to ask them what was good nor did I ask them for advice. I always got there and knew what I wanted, and that's when they began to talk to me about their beliefs and their religion."

At his botánica, Martínez sells sacramental items and herbal products and also reads tarot cards and cowries for his clientele. He offers spiritual cleansings as well. These can be as simple as rubbing flowers on the person's body or as elaborate as using candles, incense, and animal sacrifice along with prayer. He has significant knowledge of how to treat ailments, however, he notes, "What we mostly do is love issues, solutions as to love issues, to get love, to keep love, always some complication with love." He is also consulted about court cases, immigration problems, and alcoholism.

Like Martínez, many botánica owners are self- or community-designated healers, counselors, or consultants who ascertain the troubles of their clients through various techniques of divination and provide advice, *limpias*, referrals to doctors and clinics, and herbal or ritual therapies. A typical consultation (*consulta*) lasts an average of twenty minutes and costs between fifteen and twenty-five dollars.

Martínez usually initiates a session by having the client explain the nature of his or her problems. One young woman, for example, came to him hoping that he could determine whether bad luck or witchcraft was the source of her work-related troubles and failing health. She told Martínez that she had been sick for two months, she was not getting along with her peers at work, and a relative had said bad things about her. After listening attentively, Martínez shuffled his tarot cards, placed them in front of her, and asked her to divide them into three stacks and to pick one of these. Martínez then laid out the cards she selected and pointed to each one telling her what it meant. He determined that her misfortune was due to sorcery inflicted by her envious relative. He recommended a *limpia* to break the spell and ensure a prosperous future. Three weeks after this consultation and treatment, the woman had regained her health and received recognition for her efforts from her peers and her superiors.

Although some botánica proprietors focus on physical ailments, the majority attend to social and psychological ills. Healers often perceive problems as originating in "environmental sources." This blanket term may indicate such possible

causes of stress as work or household responsibilities, problems relating to illegal immigration, injuries incurred on the job, and emotional distress produced by discrimination or from the cultural differences that have emerged between immigrant parents and their children.

Despite the fact that healers have varying theories of healing and different diagnostic approaches, some generalizations can be made about their beliefs and practices. Prominent among these is the notion that illness may result from supernatural as well as natural causes. Complaints originating in the latter realm are effectively dealt with utilizing home remedies, over-the-counter products, or prescribed pharmaceuticals. Weakness in one's soul or the influence of a malevolent entity is also thought to cause somatic or psychological symptoms to develop. Such causes are usually identified through divination and are treated with rituals, supplication to folk saints or spirit guides, and medicinal herbs.

Martínez relates that if a person believes a relative to have become alcoholic as the result of witchcraft,

What they usually do is they walk through the streets where they know that people drink on the street, and if he's a beer drinker, they'll pick up a beer can, an empty beer can found on the street, and they'll put the person's photograph inside the beer can, and then they'll add other ingredients like mainly holy water and different types of oils, and just powders and organic ingredients [plant matter], and then they'll put it in front of the statue of San Simón, and alongside they will just light purple candles for domination so that the person will have the ability to dominate and overcome this problem of alcoholism. That is when they do it without the person knowing it. If the person drinks hard liquor they will find a small liquor bottle thrown on the street, and do the same spell.

Martínez adds, "The idea is for you to transfer that alcoholism to the other person that threw that bottle or can on the street and get rid of it."

### **LIMPIAS, OR RITUAL CLEANSINGS**

In addition to treating clients with rituals of transference, practitioners often assist them with *limpias* aimed at getting rid of negative energy. The type of cleansing performed depends on the healer's religious orientation as well as on the client's particular needs. Simple *limpias* may be offered at no cost. Complex ones requiring the burning of copal incense, the use of perfumed water, oils, candles, and eggs, and extensive prayers and petitions may run from forty to fifty dollars.

A special *limpia* conducted for a woman by Juan Reyes, a Guatemalan *curandero* and botánica owner, to assure luck and protection throughout the year, required that the client's head and hands be wrapped in aluminum foil while she held candles of different colors. Dense smoke from burning copal enveloped her. Reyes took a swig of strong-scented Florida Water and spewed it on the client's head, face, and back; he then passed three fresh eggs over the woman to remove



3.2  
Packaged herbal mixture used in spirit-cleansing baths (*limpias*). Reproduced with permission of Indio Products, Inc.

3.3  
Homemade herbal baths blessed by the spirit of San Simón and distributed by a local botánica for ritual and medicinal use. Photograph by Michael Owen Jones, Los Angeles, 2000.

negative vibrations. He next patted her head, shoulders, and back with red and yellow flower petals to ensure success in love and good health, followed by rubbing a large crucifix on her head several times while praying to San Simón, to whom he is devoted, and chanting petitions on her behalf. The foil with which she had been wrapped was then removed. After this Reyes placed the candles that the woman had held on the floor, surrounding them with the flower petals and eggs (the latter, which had absorbed the “bad influences,” were to be disposed of by the woman who was instructed to throw them over her shoulder in an empty lot after leaving the store).

**SACRAMENTAL OBJECTS AND HERBAL REMEDIES**

Botánicas carry an assortment of products used for therapeutic purposes, among them *veladoras*, oils, incense, bath preparations, and powders. Such items are purchased in an effort to secure luck, prosperity, and a variety of other benefits. Candles are highly specialized in function, and the inscriptions they bear or their color indicates the salubrious results that they may be used to achieve. Yellow, for example, assures good health, green attracts money, red guarantees love and affection, blue secures tranquility in the home, and black causes or reverses harm. Aerosol cans vividly decorated with saints, cats, Native Americans, African spirits, and other images indicate some of the needs compelling people to visit botánicas. They bear such designations as “Strong Luck” and “Good Fortune”; “Attract Money,” “Win the Lottery,” and “Fast Money” (*dinero rápido*); “Steady Work”; “Make Lover Return”; “Peaceful Home”; “Court Case” and “Just Judge”; “Cast



3.4  
Blessing and spirit-invoking  
sprays displayed at Indio  
Products, Inc., an international  
wholesaler of ritual products  
based in Southern California.  
Photograph by Don Cole,  
Central Los Angeles, 2004



3.5  
Oils, soaps, colognes, and  
other aromatic items used to  
heal, protect, and sacralize the  
body. Photograph by Don Cole,  
Indio Products, Inc., Central Los  
Angeles, 2004.

Off Evil"; "Protection from Envy" and "Keep Away Enemies"; and "All Purpose" (*para todo*). The contents are sprayed on a person, around the room, or at an altar.

Medicinal plants and products are also commonly sold. Some healers carry only a small number of prepackaged herbs, such as chamomile, rosemary, and mint. Others market vitamins and supplements commonly found at health food stores. Martín González, a Mexican *espiritista/curandero* who operates a botánica in Echo Park, specializes in the management of somatic complaints such as muscle pain, headaches, digestive disorders, minor wounds and burns, insomnia, fatigue, and upper respiratory infections. Approached by a woman seeking his help in dealing with migraines and sleeplessness, González asked her if she was under stress. He also inquired about when she experienced the pain, how often, and how long it lasted. The woman did not feel tense, but she did admit to working a lot. To ascertain whether or not her problem was supernatural in cause, González proceeded to read the woman's aura by first cleansing himself with Florida Water and then holding one of his hands in front and the other behind her head to feel her energy. He asked her to close her eyes while he chanted a prayer. After determining that the client was merely fatigued and experiencing nervous tension, González recommended that she run cool water on the back of her head where she felt the most pressure and that she drink valerian tea prepared with the skin of a green apple.

Among the medicinal plants grown by several herbal specialists in their yards or collected along city sidewalks and in vacant lots are *albahaca* (basil), *yerba buena* (spearmint), *epazote* (wormseed), and *yucca*. Others include *romero*

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SPIRITUAL

BATH and  
FLOOR  
WASH



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## 3.7

Friar Robert Lentz. *San Martín de Porres*, 1993. A saint celebrated for his healing abilities, San Martín de Porres is shown with containers of valerian (*valeriana*) and sage (*salvia*), sacred herbs reputed to have great curative powers and routinely utilized in folk remedies. Image © Robert Lentz, reproduced with permission of the artist; color reproduction from Bridge Building Images <[www.BridgeBuilding.com](http://www.BridgeBuilding.com)>.

## 3.8

Herbs and medicinal plants grown at a botánica. These are used in baths (*limpias*) and in the preparation of topical remedies, such as oils or salves. They are also infused in teas. Photograph by Patrick A. Polk, Los Angeles, 2000.

## 3.6 (opposite)

Product labels. Reproduced with permission of Saydel, Inc., and Indio Products, Inc.

(rosemary), which is employed as an astringent; *sábila* (aloe) for burns; *ruda* (rue) to treat gastritis as well as to induce labor; papaya as an aid to digestion; *cola de caballo* (horsetail) for kidney stones and inflamed bladder; *floripondio* (angel's-trumpet) to treat arthritis and also to induce sleep when the flower is placed under one's pillow; *salvia* (sage) for bronchial ailments and for spiritual use; and *arnica*, or wolfsbane, which laboratory tests suggest is effective in reducing inflammation by stimulating the activity of white blood cells and dispersing fluids from bruised tissue.

Some botánica owners know the medicinal uses of dozens of plants. Most are familiar with a core of twenty-five to thirty. For colds, fevers, and bronchitis, healers recommend teas and baths of *eucalipto* (eucalyptus), *gordolobo* (mullein), *jengibre* (ginger), *té de limón* (lemongrass), *verbena* (vervain), and other aromatic plants. They suggest garlic as a treatment for infections and hypertension; *poleo* (pennyroyal) in the form of a tea to relieve indigestion and anxiety; *estañate* (wormwood), as well as *epazote*, for gastrointestinal ailments; sweet basil and mint, among other herbs, to attend to insomnia and nervousness; macerated leaves of *llantén* (plantain) applied to wounds to reduce inflammation and a tea from the seeds of this plant to ease nausea; and *chayote* (vegetable pear) and the *tuna*, or fruit of the nopal cactus, as treatments for diabetes.

One *espiritista* recommends a tea made from rosemary to diminish *dolor de cabeza*, or headache pain. When asked how long it takes to work, he responds, "Well, there are people for whom the effect happens psychosomatically—upon drinking it, they feel better." Another treated a woman with migraines using

3.9

Carlos Meraz, an *espiritista* who has owned botánicas near MacArthur Park grows more than sixty plants in his yard for use in remedies and ceremonies. Photograph by Michael Owen Jones, Los Angeles, 2001.



3.10

Carlos Meraz gives a simple *limpia*, or cleansing, to each of his guests at a party honoring San Simón. Photograph by Michael Owen Jones, Los Angeles, 2001.



baths that contained salt, alcohol, and bellflower. “I don’t know about people’s faith, but I pray a lot for them and the pain goes away,” he said. “People get ill from pressure, bad treatment, pollution, and the food is not organic” but laden with insecticides.

Some of the practitioners and their clients stress their use of unadulterated plant materials as natural remedies that, while they may work more slowly than prescription medications, have fewer adverse side effects and promote the body’s ability to heal itself. “I don’t ever remember going to the doctor as a child,” said a Mexican American woman who has spent all of her seventy years in East Los Angeles and whose yard contains nearly fifty plants, about half of which are medicinal. “We always had the home remedies. Even today, I’ll go to the doctor for what I think is the last resort, to tell you the truth. And I try to avoid any drugs or over-the-counter things as I’ve become knowledgeable [about plants]. When I was younger I would take anything [prescribed medication] that was supposedly for that ailment, but not anymore.”

This woman emphasized her unwillingness to treat her seven children and herself with antibiotics unless absolutely necessary. She grows medicinal plants for upper-respiratory infections, anxiety, and gastrointestinal disorders. Numerous scientific publications indicate that commonly used herbs have pharmacologically active ingredients and consequences, for example, eucalyptus has antiseptic, expectorant, and astringent qualities, while chamomile has an antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, antispasmodic, and carminative effect. Rue contains over 110 chemical compounds, twenty-two of which have known biological activity, including

anti-exudative, spasmolytic, abortifacient, and antimicrobial. Common mullein (*Verbascum thapsus* L., family Scrophulariaceae), which healers grow to treat inflammatory diseases, asthma, spasmodic coughs, and other pulmonary problems, has known antibacterial activity. Hence, the plant materials most frequently utilized by Latino herbalists may well be effective for the applications proposed.

Botánicas provide a place for people to congregate, socialize, and discuss political and other issues without fear of censure or reprisals. Some sponsor festivals, parties, or religious ceremonies attended by families from the immediate communities but also from other cities. As sites of healing and communal support, botánicas operate not only as settings for spiritual contemplation but also as information bases. This is apparent to any visitor who sees that beliefs about illness and its treatment are passed down from healer to client and are also transmitted among patrons. Healers tend to folk ailments (e.g., *susto*, or "fright," and *empacho*, or "blocked intestine"), social ills (difficulty finding or keeping a lover, immigration and court problems, stress, depression, alcoholism, etc.), and supernatural matters. They can empathize with their clients, for many have suffered the same problems. They speak the same language, sharing not only regional dialects but cultural concepts and religious precepts. The practitioners who operate botánicas care for the whole person not just the client's symptoms, and they offer culturally appropriate recommendations for physical, psychological, and spiritual conditions.

Traditional practitioners associated with botánicas are younger and better educated than has been assumed for folk healers. Almost half of the forty-one practitioners in our sample are in their forties and fifties while a fourth are in their twenties and thirties. With regard to the twenty-eight people about whom we have this information, more than one-fourth attended high school, seven earned a bachelor's degree, and five went to graduate school. They would serve well as a bridge in efforts to develop community health care programs that link families with conventional medical practitioners who lack their native familiarity. Many botánica owners insist that they are willing to distribute information to clients about the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases and other health concerns, a desire that should be utilized in the health system. Recognizing their existence, exploring their contributions to the spiritual and health care of immigrants, and ultimately incorporating them more fully in developing policy initiatives and community health care programs will help maximize an already existing resource for many immigrants' spiritual and emotional needs, social problems, and physical ailments.