

Traditions

► Piñata





Cover photograph: Tania de Alcalá of Garden City enjoys making pinatas for her children's birthday parties.

Back photograph: Its hidden treasures are, for some, the pinata's greatest appeal.



Bases form the shape of a pinata. One of the easiest ways to make a pinata is to cover a balloon.

MEXICAN AMERICANS IN KANSAS

Mexican Americans have become a significant part of the populations of the United States and Kansas within this century. Today Kansas is one of five states outside the Southwest to be comprised of more than 1 percent Mexican Americans.

The Mexican presence in Kansas is older than the state itself. Mexicans regularly passed through this area since the mid-nineteenth century as cowboys on cattle drives from Texas or as wagoners on the Santa Fe Trail. Permanent communities of Mexican immigrants did not form in Kansas until the beginning of the twentieth century. The period from 1900 to 1930 marked the largest influx of Mexican immigrants to the state. As has been the case with all movements of newcomers to the United States, this wave of immigration was fueled by conditions in the home country.

Until the turn of the century the rural economy of Mexico was based on a system in which peasants were bound as virtual serfs to the owners of large estates, or *haciendas*. Shortly after the turn of the century, however, the traditional forms of agriculture practiced in many parts of Mexico began to give way to commercial agriculture directed toward export crops. This was the case in the central highland states of Mexico where the Mexican Central Railway opened large areas to national and international markets. For this reason the highland states of Michoacán, Guanajuato, Zacatecas, and Jalisco contributed many immigrants at this time. As the agricultural economy changed, there was a reduced need for agricultural labor and a shortage of available land. Two major depressions in the first two decades of the twentieth century only added to the economic hardship of rural Mexicans.

Starting in 1910 an additional incentive for emigration came with the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution. The violence and social disruption that ensued encouraged many to seek a better life elsewhere.

Conditions in the United States favored immigration as well. At a time when life was becoming harder for workers in Mexico, the economy of the western United States was growing. There the chronic shortages of labor for mining, agriculture, and railroads served to provide Mexicans with a favorable destination. At first the greatest number came to work as laborers on the railroads, with many being employed by the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe. Most of these men were hired to work from May until October. The majority then returned to their homes and families in Mexico during the off season. Some, however, remained in the United States throughout the year where they found employment as agricultural workers to supplement their railroad contracts.



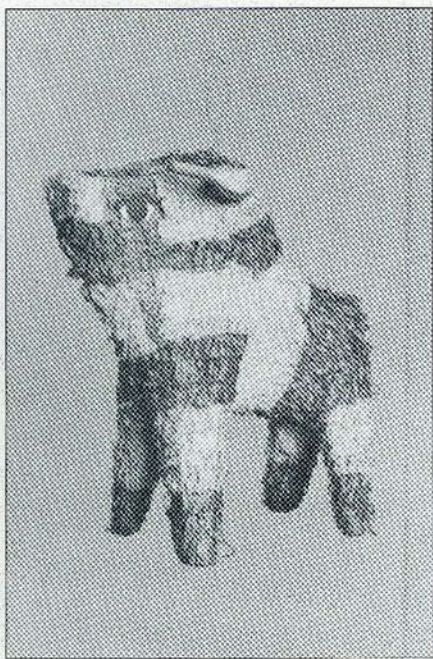
Tania de Alcala uses a flour and water paste to glue newspaper strips to the balloon base.

In time, Mexican immigrants began to move into the railroad shops and to acquire jobs with a greater degree of permanence. This was of benefit to workers who wanted to bring their families to the United States and establish a more permanent residence. Mexican immigrants began to be hired in other industries as well. Many Mexicans came to be employed in the meat packing houses in Kansas City. The movement of Mexicans into factories accelerated during the First World War when the interruption of immigration from Europe and the growth in industry for the war effort created a labor shortage.

As more Mexican immigrants came to reside permanently in Kansas, the nature of their communities began to change. The inclusion of entire families in the communities caused them to become broader and more diverse in composition. Although the neighborhoods, or *barrios* as they are known in Spanish, were usually very small, they became a place where the residents could shop, go to church, eat, and socialize with friends without having to go more than a few blocks from home.

Typically, it has not been difficult to maintain ethnic traditions in the Mexican neighborhoods. In the beginning, contact with other ethnic groups was limited because of language barriers and prejudice. Often the *barrios* were located close to the railroad yards in which the residents worked. For this reason other, more established ethnic groups chose not to live in or near the *barrios*. This added to the sense of isolation and reinforced traditional practices.

In time, however, Mexican immigrants and their descendants have become represented in all parts of American society. Although some traditions are practiced less or have fallen by the wayside, many continue to provide a sense of identity and continuity with the past. Now, however, it is not always a sense of separation that reinforces the traditions, but the need of the individuals themselves as they choose to continue the ways of their parents.



Pinatas can take on many shapes.

THE HISTORY OF THE PIÑATA

Pinatas are a common sight in all parts of the United States. Usually covered with brightly colored tissue or crepe paper, they resemble objects, animals, and even popular cartoon characters. Most people believe *pinatas* are a strictly Mexican tradition, however, the *piñata* originated in Italy during the Renaissance.

In the early part of the sixteenth century, Italians played a game that involved blindfolding a person and having him or her swing a stick at a clay pot which was suspended in air. It is unknown what was contained within the pot. This clay pot was called a *pignatta*. The word comes from the Italian word *pigna*, meaning *cone-shaped*.

By the middle of the sixteenth century, Italians had brought their *pignatta* custom to other countries in Europe. In Spain the word *pignatta* was changed to the Spanish word *piñata*, and the custom was given religious significance. The breaking of the *piñata* occurred only during Lent. The first Sunday of Lent was designated as *Piñata Sunday*. On this day people in Spain put on black masks and held masquerade balls called the *Dance of the Piñata*. During the dance, a *piñata* was broken.

Unlike the Italian word *pignatta*, which referred to the clay pot, the Spanish word *piñata* referred to the game itself. The *piñata* container was called an *olla* and was unglazed and undecorated. The *olla*'s usual function was to hold food and water. Some people began to cover the clay pot to make it more attractive.

There is no recorded date as to when the *piñata* arrived in Mexico, but there is some speculation that the custom was carried there by Spanish explorers nearly four hundred years ago. In Mexico the *piñata* continued to have religious significance, however several changes did occur. The custom of the *piñata* is more closely associated with Christmas rather than Lent, although *pinatas* are used for many types of celebrations and holidays.

The appearance of the *piñata* also changed. During the twentieth century, with the availability of tissue paper, Mexicans began to decorate *piñatas*. When tourism in Mexico increased and tourists started buying *piñatas*, potters could not keep up with the demand. They searched for an easier method of making *piñatas*, and the *paper mache* version became common. More elaborate figures such as bulls, stars, and donkeys could be made quickly and sold for souvenirs and celebrations.

Many families make their own *piñatas*, passing techniques on from generation to generation. Others buy their *piñatas*. Sometimes *piñata*-making parties are held and several families bring treats to fill the *piñatas*. Since the arrival of the custom in Mexico, candy, nuts, fruits, and sometimes small toys are used to fill the *piñata*.

Diverse stories and customs are attached to the traditional *piñata*. One tale states that the *piñata* symbolizes evil or the devil. It is believed that when the *piñata* is broken, evil has been overcome and the world is rewarded with many blessings, symbolized by the treats. In the state of Tuscany in Italy it is common to hang three *piñatas* during certain celebrations. Each *piñata* contains a surprise such as ashes, water, and candy. The player breaking the *piñata* has no idea what he will be releasing.

Today the custom of the *piñata* can be found in such countries as Spain, Italy, Portugal, British Honduras, Latin America, Canada, and the United States. It is enjoyed by children and adults alike and has been a part of many types of celebrations.

MEXICAN CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS

The breaking of the *piñata* during the Christmas season takes place during *Las Posadas* which is a custom that originated in Mexico. The custom could be classified as a folk drama or pageant. The word *Posada* means *inn* or *shelter*, and the pageant symbolizes the struggle of Mary and Joseph to find shelter for the night. *Las Posadas* are held from December 16 to December 24. In some communities several *Posadas* are held on consecutive nights. On the other hand, some communities celebrate *Las Posadas* only on Christmas Eve.

Often an entire neighborhood will come together to participate in the festival. Small figures of Mary and Joseph lead the traditional procession. Other members of the *Posadas* carry lighted candles. The group moves from house to house singing the traditional songs of the *Posadas*. These songs vary in words and music depending on the local tradition. The music tells the conversation between Joseph and an innkeeper.

<i>En el nombre del cielo</i>	In the name of Heaven
<i>os pido posada</i>	we ask shelter of thee
<i>pues no puede andar</i>	because [she] cannot travel,
<i>mi esposa amada</i>	my beloved wife.

At each house the individual playing Joseph asks for a room and at each house he is refused.

<i>No sera posadas</i>	There is no shelter
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When the procession reaches the last home, the conversation is repeated, but this time the travelers are welcomed.

<i>Entren santos peregrinos</i>	Enter, holy travelers,
<i>reciban este rincon</i>	receive this corner;
<i>que aunque es pobre la morada</i>	although the chapel is poor,
<i>os la doy de corazon</i>	I give thee from the heart.

Each member of the procession places his or her lighted candles around the nativity scene, called the *nacimiento*. This completes the religious ceremony and it is now time to break the *piñata*. Although the *piñata* itself has changed over the years, the game has remained





Tania de Alcalá learned the traditional art of piñata making growing up in Mexico.

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basically the same. The filled *piñata* is suspended by a rope just above the heads of the players. It is important that the rope is hung so that the *piñata* may be moved up and down. One person manipulates the rope to periodically change the position of the *piñata*. One guest is blindfolded and led to the spot beneath the *piñata*. He or she is handed a stick or bat and spun around a few times. As the other guests watch, the blindfolded player takes three swings at the *piñata* in an attempt to break it open. If the player is not successful, the stick and blindfold are passed on to the next guest. The game goes on until the *piñata* is broken.

When the *piñata* breaks, everyone grabs for the contents. Those who do not get a treat from the *piñata* sing a traditional song asking the hostess to provide them with a treat. The hostess brings out more treats and an additional favor, often a miniature glass toy filled with candy, for each guest to take home.

PIÑATA MAKING TECHNIQUES

Some families continue to use a clay pot or jar for the base of their *piñata*. A large jar is made of clay and baked in a kiln or oven. It must not be baked too long or it will be too difficult to break.

Today many *piñatas* are made using a *paper mache* method. In this method paper strips are dipped in a glue-like substance and applied to a base. The base of the *piñata* determines the shape. Bases can be made of hatboxes, paper bags, or chicken wire covered with cloth dipped in Plaster of Paris.

One of the easiest ways to make a *piñata* is to cover a balloon. Balloons can be round, egg shaped, long, or a combination of these shapes. After inflating a balloon, paper strips dipped in paste are applied in layers. An opening at the top of the *piñata* must be made so that it can be filled with treats later. Four layers of paper will give the *piñata* strength. When the *piñata* is dry, the balloon can be removed. A harness, made with rope or twine, is attached so that it encircles the *piñata* from bottom to top. *Piñatas* are decorated

using strips of tissue paper folded lengthwise and cut into fringe. Sometimes *piñatas* are decorated during a party. Traditionally, on the day of the party, pastries are baked to serve to guests, and *piñatas* are filled with candy, nuts, fruits, and sometimes toys.

CONCLUSION

Although the *piñata* has assumed a number of forms and uses during its history, the basic nature of the custom has remained constant. Perhaps it is the simple nature of breaking the *piñata* that makes it so adaptable to diverse environments. This flexibility also contributes to its continuation over time. While other customs have disappeared or become localized to particular communities, the customs surrounding the *piñata* remain widespread. One change that has come in recent years is the tendency to use *piñatas* for more personal celebrations, such as birthday parties. Rather than viewing this as a loss or dilution of the tradition, it can be seen as characteristic of this tradition and of traditions in general. Through this adaptive force it is likely that the custom of the *piñata* will continue to thrive for many generations to come.

FURTHER READINGS

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One method of decorating a *piñata* is to fringe strips of tissue or crepe paper.

DIRECTIONS FOR MAKING A PIÑATA

Materials:

Balloon

Newspaper strips (1 inch wide)

Paste (made with glue and water or flour and water)

Masking tape

Tissue paper cut in 2 inch strips

String

Cone-shaped paper cups or construction paper

Instructions:

1. Dip newspaper strips in the paste. Cover inflated balloon with one coat of newspaper strips, leaving an opening at the top. Let dry overnight.
2. Attach paper cones with tape onto piñata (See Fig. 1). Add several more coats of newspaper strips as described in #1. Let piñata dry overnight.
3. When layers of paper are completely dry and hard, pop the balloon and remove it. Using string, make a harness around piñata for hanging (See Fig. 2).
4. Fold 2 inch strips of tissue paper in half and cut on the fold (See Fig. 3). Reverse paper and glue to the base to decorate the piñata.

Fig. 1

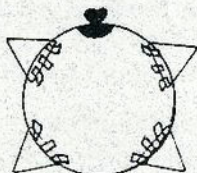


Fig. 3

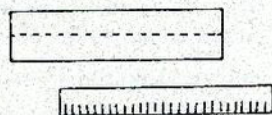
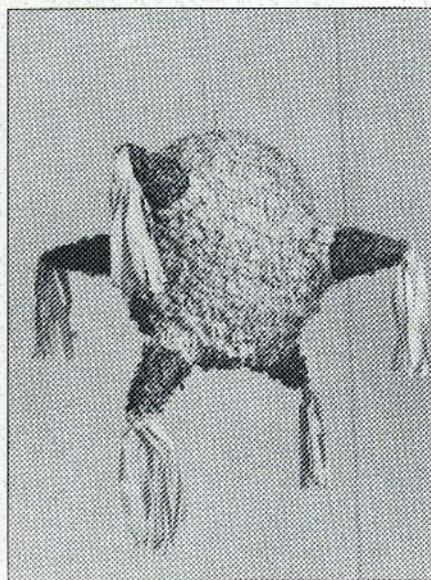
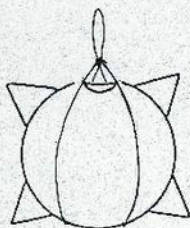


Fig. 2



Today piñatas are used to celebrate holidays throughout the year.

TRADITIONS

Kansas has a rich and diverse folk art heritage. Within the state, artists continue to practice art forms that are passed on from parent to child, worker to worker, and neighbor to neighbor. Knowledge is taught by word of mouth or by example. Our folk arts are traditional in that they are part of an unbroken thread that can be traced back through time. No set time period is necessary, however, for a particular behavior to become part of our folklore. Instead, an art form must have existed long enough to enable variations to develop. Once something is "in tradition" it no longer exists in a standardized form. Instead local variants can be found.

Folk art is community bound. We all belong to many groups or communities throughout our lifetimes. Ethnic, religious, occupational, and familial are but a few of the communities in which we maintain memberships. To provide continuity in our lives, some communities extend over time and distance thereby creating a traditional culture. The folk arts of a group have been selected and supported by a number of people within the community. A folk art is the product of a series of choices made by individuals which in turn have been accepted by the group. Folk culture therefore represents the sum total of a community's choices, linking the present to the past.

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