

Mexican Field Studies

“The Piñata” – Educational Video Network

Although it is rather short, “The Piñata” is quite illuminating about the history and making of piñatas.

Piñatas are common in American culture because of the large Latino population, but the history of the piñata is not widely known. First made in Teotihuacan after the Spanish Conquest, they are based on an old Spanish gypsy tradition of breaking clay pots for good luck. That evolved into an association of breaking piñatas with Christmas and entertainment in the colonial days of Mexico. In displays of extravagant, conspicuous consumption, the colonial upper classes put silver and gold jewelry in the piñatas (which no doubt tasted horrible).

One of the two most surprising elements of the 9-minute film is the pure variety in the subjects of piñatas; the markets shown have everything from an elephant and a panda to a pineapple and a two-meter artichoke. The second item of amazement is the pure effort involved in making a genuine piñata. The piñatas that I have made were small: papier-mâché on a balloon, then squares of tissue paper painstakingly glued on the outside with pencils. But the *real* piñata, as the video shows, takes *much* longer. Beginning with an unfired clay pot, the craftsman bores holes into it to string up the piñata. He then places five newspaper cones on the pot and uses a paste of flour and water to make them stay. Then, he covers the pot with papier-mâché. Next, he makes tissue paper curls and “waterfalls.” The waterfalls go on the ends of the cones, while the curls go on the main part of the piñata. Using foil, he covers the cones and makes a design in the curls, called “la flor del centro.” One must wonder why Wal-mart’s inexpert piñatas are so expensive!

After seeing this little video I’ll never look at a piñata in quite the same way.