



JOURNEY THROUGH NEW MEXICO

# Saintly Art

**Sacred retablos enjoy a second coming as popular folk art.**

By **NANCY COGGESHALL**

*Again there is no rain. The sky above the Sangre de Cristos remains, as it did yesterday, insistently blue. No clouds. The corn on the stalk is a withered brown.*

**F**aced with such a scorching drought, the eighteenth-century settler of northern New Mexico would go home and pray to a retablo—an image painted on a hand-tooled wood board—of San Ysidro, the patron saint of New Mexico farmers. A glimpse at one of these retablos makes it easy to see why the settlers sought the help of this saint: wearing colonial dress much like their own, San Ysidro is shown praying in his field, while a little angel plows for him.

Although retablos are beautiful objects, they weren't mere decoration. Like Russian icons, they provided the devout with images of saints or holy scenes painted in simple lines on small wooden panels. Blessed by priests, their presence in the home ensured that the stories of the saints would continue to be told. Together with the three-dimensional sculpted figures of saints known as *bultos*, retablos formed the *santos*, or devotional art of New Mexico.

The retablo emerged as a homegrown folk art in the late seventeenth century. After the settlement of the northern frontier of New Spain in 1598, the

Spanish crown financed the decoration of churches in New Mexico. But during the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, those twenty-five early missions were destroyed. Spain withdrew its financial support for decorating churches. Rather than import European or Mexican art, local artisans and priests decided to make their own. They fashioned local woods such as cottonwood and pine into rectangular boards. Indigenous vegetation provided natural pigments for color.

The tradition of santos making died out in the early twentieth century, but an explosion of popularity of folk art in the 1970s fueled a revival of Hispanic arts. Today a splendid collection of traditional and contemporary retablos can be viewed in the Hispanic Heritage Wing of the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe. The best place to see contemporary retablos, though, is during the Spanish Market and the Contemporary Spanish Market, both held in Santa Fe on the last weekend in July. Collectors can find small retablos (approximately four-inches-by-four-inches) for as little as twenty-five dollars. Prices run to six hundred dollars for larger works by such well-known artists as Charles Carillo, Estrellita de Atochoa Carillo, Gustavo Victor Goler, Nicholas Herrera, and Marie Romero Cash. Original seventeenth- and eighteenth-century works sell for four hundred to four thousand dollars.

Like traditional retablos, modern-day works depict primitive figures in simple colors for contrast. Linear perspective is avoided, and there is no shading or highlights. Artists stick with traditional motifs: Santa Rita still wears a black habit and holds a cross and a skull, and Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe is dressed in red with a blue cloak, with a halo surrounding her entire body. Although today's artists prefer brighter colors—a few even cross the line into

gaudy fluorescence—most still use the same natural pigments as their predecessors.

Today's santos artists (called *santeros* and *santeras*) are anything but traditional. Bernadette Pino worked as an architectural designer in Katmandu for thirteen years before returning to Taos to make retablos. José Armijo got a degree in business and had launched a successful career at the state Department of Taxation and Revenue before he discovered retablos and turned to making them full time. Armijo handcuts sugar pine boards, cutting the shapes with a scroll saw and then chiseling the edges. His green pigments come from clay he collects by the side of the road in Placitas. His blue is azurite crushed with a mortar and pestle. Brown comes from black walnuts, black from chimney soot. One of his shades of red comes from the cochineal, a small red insect that feeds on cactus. Says Armijo, "I enjoy doing these pieces, this is work I'm proud of."

With their roots firmly planted in religious life, today's retablos can be appreciated on many other levels as well. Pino advises people to view them "as devotional art, as an appreciation of New Mexico's Hispanic tradition. And for the craft itself." ■

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## Details...

### WHERE TO BUY

- **SPANISH MARKET**—July 25–26, Santa Fe Plaza (Traditional Spanish colonial arts by contemporary artists).
- **SANTA FE ART AUCTION**—Museum of Fine Arts Benefit Preview: November 13, 9 a.m.–11 a.m.; Auction 1:30 p.m.–5 p.m. November 14. Sweeney Convention Center, Marcy Street, 505-988-5049.

### WHERE TO VIEW

- **MUSEUM OF INTERNATIONAL FOLK ART**—706 Camino Lejo, Santa Fe, 505-827-6350.
- **THE HISPANIC ARTS BUILDING**—September 11–27, New Mexico State Fair in Albuquerque.
- **A TRAVELING EXHIBIT**—"Our Saints Among Us: 400 Years of New Mexican Devotional Art" will be on view at the Fuller Lodge Arts Center in Los Alamos, January 8–February 13.