

Four Centuries of a Tradition- heritage

During the seventeenth-century, Spanish Franciscan friars in New Mexico imported religious oil paintings, popular prints, and a limited number of sculptures from Europe and Mexico to adorn the newly built missions. Early New Mexican images of devotion reflected the same subjects and iconography as their Mexican colonial counterparts from Spanish traditions.

Following the re-colonization of New Mexico, Fray Andrés García, Bernardo Miera y Pacheco, and an artist known only as the Eighteenth-Century Novice were among the first generation of *santeros* (saint makers), active from about 1750-1790. Migrating from southern New Spain, they are considered prototypes for later New Mexican-born artists. By 1800, the "classical" period of *santero* art had begun in the remote villages of northern New Mexico and a distinctive art of devotion developed. Although colonists were geographically distant from the urban centers of Mexico, contact was maintained but often goods beyond bare necessities were limited. As a result, local artisans began to carve and paint images of saints, known as *santos*, to meet the needs for personal devotional objects and church adornment.

Shifting from the original European and Mexican sources, artists created a local version of the baroque style by the late eighteenth-century. Mostly self-taught artists, they used the same pine, aspen, and cottonwood root as that used by Native Americans. Pigments for painting combined mineral and plant pigments used by Pueblo Indians with imported European or Mexican oil paint.

Santeros also adopted the practice of a tanned buckskin as a painting surface to create images of saints on hide. The result of this fusion was thoroughly original in style. *Santos* were made for use in churches, homes, and *moradas*. Their makers were both amateur artists, as well as more skilled artisans who filled important commissions. Some had workshops with apprentices who copied from the master artisan's work. Devotional art produced by New Mexican born and trained *santeros* reached its summit between 1820-1860 when churches and private chapels were built in the northern villages and works were being produced by such artists as José Aragón, José Rafael Aragón, José Manuel Benavides, and José Anastacio Casados.

The last generation of traditional *santeros* developed their skills through the patronage of the *Penitente* Brotherhood. Men like José Benito Ortega, Miguel Herrera, Juan Ramón Velásquez, and several other anonymous regional artists spread New Mexico's unique art of devotion into southern Colorado and continued these traditions into the early twentieth century

By the early 1900s, the old *santo*-making tradition had waned. Its revival began in the 1920s in Santa Fe when the production of relatively small unpainted pieces for the tourist market was encouraged by American artists and collectors interested in Hispanic culture. This revived *santero* tradition remains vibrant today in New Mexico with dozens of artists producing *santos* based on centuries of tradition and their own innovations.

