

# THE OWINGS GALLERY ON PALACE

## On the Santo Art of New Mexico, 1790–1907

For most of human history, man has been a religious creature whose tendency has been to give plastic form to the beliefs and principles that order the cosmos, govern his community, and to which he himself attaches cardinal importance. Being only occasionally incommoded by iconoclastic impulses, this religiously inspired propensity for artistic expression has produced works of the greatest majesty of which our species is perhaps capable. A similarly animated, albeit quieter, form of religious art flourished in an arid outpost of Iberian America about 1790–1907.<sup>1</sup> This was the *santo* tradition of New Mexico,<sup>2</sup> a striking expression of Catholic piety fashioned through the interaction of disparate yet interdependent cultural strands and melded together by time, necessity, and historical circumstance.<sup>3</sup>

That the depiction and veneration of saints acquired considerable importance in this sparsely peopled frontier province of Spanish North America should be no occasion for surprise. For New Mexico was at this time little more than a diffuse collection of agricultural hamlets, villages, missions, and pueblos—an isolated dominion of no great productivity, meager security, few clerics, and where networks of kin and kith were modest and overextended. It was thus in the saints that the people reposed their trust.<sup>4</sup> This intense religiosity found natural expression in *santos*—wooden images of Christ, saints, and holy personages—a tradition by no means peculiar to New Mexico but that attained here a dignified simplicity unmatched by any other province of Spain’s prodigious empire.

Executed by *santeros* (saint makers) for private homes, churches, and lay confraternities,<sup>5</sup> historic New Mexico *santos* comprise two principal types, namely, *bultos* (polychrome statuary) and *retablos* (painted panels).<sup>6</sup> Traditional *bultos*, fashioned from the wood of riverine cottonwood and pine trees, are not in general monoxylous but consist rather of distinct wooden components (viz., the body and extremities) deftly joined together by means of wooden pegs. Accoutrements and the more diminutive features, such as the nose, were in turn executed in gesso or also fashioned from wood.<sup>7</sup> *Retablos* are devotional paintings of religious personages on panel (hewn from pinewood, wrought by adze, and liberally brushed with gesso).<sup>8</sup> Rendered in outline and showing little regard for perspective, these images are simple portraits, seldom having narrative content.<sup>9</sup> *Bultos* and *retablos* alike were painted from a modest palette of tempera colors,<sup>10</sup> and the single figure, with an emphasis on the frontal view, predominates.<sup>11</sup> Both forms owe their noble simplicity to the exigencies of the times, the exiguous resources of a desert frontier society, and the need to convey with perspicuity the cardinal truths of the Christian religion to the preliterate natives.<sup>12</sup> Prized by Christianized Indians and Hispanos alike as devotional and tutelary objects, *santos* also possessed a vital didactic

function in these largely unlettered communities as conveyors of religious notions and sentiments—figuring conspicuously in village churches and private homes throughout the province.<sup>13</sup>

While the ultimate origins of the New Mexico santos in the religio-artistic traditions of Europe are clear enough, less understood are the many stages of development through which the transplanted tradition passed to attain its classic character. Sacred objects were imported from Spain or, more commonly, Mexico, but being few in number and beyond most colonists' means, a native tradition of religious carving speedily sprang into existence.<sup>14</sup> The people of colonial New Mexico made themselves proficient in mastering and adapting the raw materials of the province to suit their ends, and the santeros, who lacked formal academic training, proved no exception. By ingenuity and improvisation, the first New Mexico santeros and earlier producers of religious imagery availed themselves of local woods and pigments to redress the scarcity of devotional objects—working from foreign examples, and actuated by an ardent faith, to execute works of crude grandeur and sublime simplicity.<sup>15</sup>

Although influenced by the baroque style and other currents ascendant in Spain and her southerly American possessions, New Mexico santeros had neither the means nor the training to faithfully reproduce the images derived thence. Consequently, their art forms rapidly developed an autochthonous character owing as much to the straitened conditions of agrarian frontier life and fact of Hispano-Indian interdependence as to the original sources.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the historic santos exhibit a stark simplicity, tendency to abstraction, linearity, and unconscious archaism—features that have induced a comparison of New Mexico santos to the Christian art of the early Middle Ages.<sup>17</sup> Many of the earliest producers of religious images in New Mexico are thought to have been American Indian proselytes,<sup>18</sup> and it has been posited by some authorities that the distinctiveness of New Mexico santos can be ascribed in part to the tradition's continuities with pre-Hispanic artistic practices and aesthetics.<sup>19</sup> In any case, the resultant tradition rapidly acquired its own impetus. Once further matured, santeros became more apt to dispense with certain motifs and tendencies of European and Mexican art that seemed inapposite to the New Mexican context. The outlining on *retablos* also grew bolder, and stylization and even symbolization of supporting attributes became increasingly general.<sup>20</sup> Contrary to what is stated in the earlier literature, foreign influences continued to exert themselves, but this was very much an “active reception” whereby santeros au courant with artistic developments elsewhere borrowed selectively from them for their own purposes.<sup>21</sup>

It is no accident that the beginning of the golden age of the New Mexico santo tradition (1790–1860) is contemporaneous with several seminal developments in *Nuevomexicano* history, chief among them a newfound agricultural prosperity (in relative terms) among Hispanos, growing isolation from the rest of New Spain in consequence of Comanche expansion, and a novel cultural coherence resulting from an accelerated process of ethnic amalgamation.<sup>22</sup> This was a society that was finally coming into its own, and the crystallization of a distinct New Mexico santo tradition was a symptom and outgrowth of this overarching historical dynamic. Past centuries of privation and hardship, assuaged only by the beneficence of the saints, had furnished a ready source of inspiration upon

which santeros living in the comparative “comfort” of the early nineteenth century could draw. An era of pronounced economic and demographic expansion, it was one in which a new confidence was felt, and it marked the apotheosis of New Mexico religious art. The santero, no longer laboring amid conditions of chronic undersupply and having a growing native corpus to guide him, was thus enabled to devote his faculties to the perfection of his craft.<sup>23</sup> The cardinal aim of his work continued to be to inculcate religious truths by means of artistic expression—of special importance in view of New Mexico’s acute paucity of priests—but this object was not so rigid as to inhibit individual creativity.

The influx of mass-produced religious imagery that attended the great expansion of commerce in the second half of the nineteenth century—coupled with the disfavor with which santos were regarded by foreign-born ecclesiastics—sounded the knell for the tradition in its historical form.<sup>24</sup> Extruded from most churches, santos were increasingly commended to the care of Penitente *moradas* or relegated to the status of private devotional objects, fading deeper into the historical memory.<sup>25</sup> Ironically, the same Anglo penetration that so threatened other Hispano life-ways served to revivify the santo tradition. While mere curios or folk art to most, not a few of the more artistically minded of these newcomers (among them several notable modernist painters) found in them a raw, intrinsic genius that compelled them to assemble often extensive collections of *bultos* and *retablos* and patronize the “Spanish colonial arts.” Recast *a lo profano*, the santos were to be appreciated primarily for their inherent aesthetic qualities. Yet concomitant with this swell of outside interest was renewed native attachment to the santos—not only as devotional objects but, perhaps more significantly, as markers of Hispano distinctiveness and a means for local artisans largely disconnected from the tradition to profit from it in resurrected form.<sup>26</sup>

New Mexico santos have been characterized as a kind of American “primitivism”—an appellation fraught with value-laden connotations but apropos when considering the formal properties of these works and that they were executed in a spirit of earnest piety with an aim to simplicity. In these respects, they may seem to have a closer affinity to the masterworks of Melanesia and Central Africa than to much in the Western corpus. It is perhaps precisely the liminal character of the santos—their representation of the familiar within an unfamiliar, seemingly archaic guise—that facilitated their rediscovery and reclamation as a kind of authentic American primitivism sufficiently intelligible to Anglo-Protestant America.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, they represent a curious adaptation of the universal to local conditions and peculiarities.

In spite of all the vicissitudes through which the tradition has passed, the image of the santo endures—as an object of reverence in Pueblo and Hispano churches, a symbol of Southwestern exoticism, a testament to a singular artistic faculty, and as a revived contemporary art form.<sup>28</sup> Not mere relics of a simple folk or a quaint religiosity, santos are living testaments to a supra-cultural faith, sincere and fervid, that has nourished the soul of the upper Rio Grande Valley for over four centuries. It is in this localized art form, conducted with the utmost vigor and sincerity, that one discerns the spirit of human creativity in its most pure and unselfconscious form.

Increasingly concentrated in public museums, The Owings Gallery has the great privilege to showcase a collection of the highest excellence, the like of which has not been seen this century. The works at hand offer ample attestation of what can issue from great artistic facility matched by a hearty piety and represent santos at their very finest.

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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Larry Frank, *A Land So Remote*, Vol. 1, 3 vols, (Santa Fe, NM, Red Crane Books, 2001), 24.
2. “New Mexico” is used here synecdochically to refer to the lands formerly comprehended in the historical province of Santa Fe de Nuevo México in which the santo tradition became established (viz., the present US state of New Mexico and the San Luis Valley of Colorado). As a matter of convenience and convention, it has been retained in preference to the more precise designation of “upper Rio Grande Valley.”
3. Elizabeth Boyd, *Saints & Saint Makers of New Mexico*, (Santa Fe, NM, Laboratory of Anthropology, 1946); José E. Espinosa, *Saints in the Valleys: Christian Sacred Images in the History, Life and Folkart of Spanish New Mexico*, (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1960); Robin Farwell Stoller, “The Early Santeros of New Mexico: A Problem in Ethnic Identity and Artistic Tradition,” in *Transforming Images: New Mexican Santos In-between Worlds*, ed. Claire Farago and Donna Pierce, (University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 117–33.
4. Boyd, *Saints*; Donald C. Cutter, “With a Little Help from Their Saints,” *Pacific Historical Review* 53, no. 2 (1984): 123–40. doi:10.2307/3639183.
5. Frank, *A Land*, 13, 28, 34f.
6. Crucifixes may be looked upon as a subtype of *bullo* or constituting a discrete category. Occupying an ancillary position are *reredoses* (altar screens), which were commissioned from the most skilled of santeros for churches and private chapels. Carved and painted, the majority of them were composed of multiple **retablos** and often were built to support freestanding sculptures or a tabernacle (Marie Romero Cash, personal communication, April 30, 2019; Boyd, *Saints*; Espinosa 1960, *Saints*; Marie Romero Cash, *Santos: Enduring Images of Northern New Mexican Village Churches*, [Boulder, CO, University Press of Colorado, 1999]).
7. Margaret Miller, “Religious Folk Art of the Southwest,” *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 10, no. 5/6 (1943): 2. doi:10.2307/4058135; Larry Frank, *New Kingdom of the Saints: Religious Art of New Mexico, 1780-1907*, (Santa Fe, NM: Red Crane Books, 1992), 24; Roland F. Dickey, *New Mexico Village Arts*, (Albuquerque, NM, University of New Mexico Press, 1949); Laura C. Widmar, personal communication, May 7, 2019.
8. Frank, *New Kingdom*, 26, 248.
9. Mitchell A. Wilder and Edgar Breitenbach, *Santos: The Religious Folk Art of New Mexico*, (Colorado Springs, CO, Taylor Museum of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, 1943), 45; Elizabeth Boyd, *Popular Arts of Spanish New Mexico*, (Santa Fe, NM, Museum of New Mexico Press, 1974).
10. Boyd, *Saints*, 30.
11. Wilder and Breitenbach, *Religious Folk Art*, 41.
12. Boyd, *Saints*.

13. Dickey, *Village Arts*; Boyd, *Saints*; Frank, *New Kingdom*, 26; Frank, *A Land*, 20ff.
14. Boyd, *Saints*; Frank, *A Land*. The earliest images of purely local derivation have been lost to history, and the nature and character of pre-Revolt sacred images is enshrined in obscurity (Sheldon Cheney and Martha Candler, "Santos. An Enigma of American Native Art," *Parnassus* 7, no. 4 [1935]: 22. doi:10.2307/771447.).
15. Boyd, *Saints*; Espinosa 1960, *Saints*; Cash, *Santos*.
16. Boyd, *Saints*; Espinosa 1960, *Saints*; Frank, *A Land*; Stoller, "The Early Santeros," in *Transforming Images*; Claire Farago, "Locating New Mexican Santos In-between Worlds," in *Transforming Images: New Mexican Santos In-between Worlds*, ed. Claire Farago and Donna Pierce, (University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 1–11.
17. Frank, *A Land*; Espinosa, *Saints*: xi; Wilder and Breitenbach, *Religious Folk Art*, 41.
18. Paralleling the larger problems of attribution and contestations of heritage, the identities of those who created these objects remains a matter of controversy. Despite the prevailing tendency to look upon santos as purely Hispano (Spanish American) in inspiration and origin, there is evidence to suggest that not a few santos were made by indigenous hands or those of mixed heritage (Cheney and Candler, "Santos," 22; Robin Farwell Gavin, "Current Approaches to Problems of Attribution," in *Transforming Images: New Mexican Santos In-between Worlds*, ed. Claire Farago and Donna Pierce, [University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006], 229-40; Stoller, "The Early Santeros"). What is more, to regard the primary ethnocultural cleavages in New Mexico as static, impermeable blocs disregards the extent to which, over the centuries, numberless individual actors have passed between these categories.
19. Farago, "Locating New Mexican Santos;" Stoller, "The Early Santeros." It bears noting that there is a very considerable division of opinion respecting the influence of indigenous artistic forms on the colonial Christian art of New Mexico. A number of authors, among them Espinosa (1960) and Frank (1992), reject the idea that native influence helped give shape the santo tradition.
20. Boyd, *Saints*: 29ff; Frank, *A Land*, 41ff.
21. Donna Pierce, "The Active Reception of International Artistic Sources in New Mexico," in *Transforming Images: New Mexican Santos In-between Worlds*, ed. Claire Farago and Donna Pierce, (University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 44–57.
22. Frank, *A Land*, 5ff, 24–7; Alicia V. Tjarks, "Demographic, Ethnic and Occupational Structure of New Mexico, 1790," *The Americas* 35, no. 01 (1978): 45-88. doi:10.2307/980925.
23. Frank, *A Land*, 9.
24. Its last redoubt was the still more isolated San Luis Valley of southern Colorado (William J. Wallrich, "The Santero Tradition in the San Luis Valley," *Western Folklore* 10, no. 2 [1951]: 153. doi:10.2307/1497968.).
25. Frank, *A Land*; Marie Romero Cash, personal communication, May 1, 2019.
26. Stephanie A. Lewthwaite, *A Contested Art: Modernism and Mestizaje in New Mexico*, (Norman, OK, University of Oklahoma Press, 2015).
27. Cf. Cheney and Candler, "Santos." Yet this intelligibility could also be a double-edged sword, for in the eyes of many, the santo tradition—and Hispano art more generally—could not escape classification as "folk art." Indeed, an appreciation of these objects beyond their "primitive" qualities and inherent exoticism was often elusive (Tey Marianna Nunn, *Sin Nombre: Hispana and Hispano Artists of the New Deal Era*, [Albuquerque, NM, University of New Mexico Press, 2001], 34).
28. Frank, *A Land*; Nunn, *Sin Nombre*, 34; Stephanie Lewthwaite, "Reworking the Spanish Colonial Paradigm: Mestizaje and Spirituality in Contemporary New Mexican Art," *Journal of American Studies* 47, no. 02 (2013): 339-62. doi: 10.1017/s002187581300011x.
29. Frank, *A Land*, 13–5.