IMAGES OF Penance, Images of Mercy

Santos and Ceremonies of the Hispanic Southwest (1860-1910)

Taylor Museum for Southwestern Studies
Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center
THE COLONY

New Mexico (including what is now southern Colorado) formed the northernmost frontier of the Spanish colonial empire in the New World. Among the reasons for its settlement were the need to protect the rich silver-mining areas of northern New Spain and the desire to convert the native Indians to Catholicism.

The colony didn't develop quickly. The environment was harsh, there were few natural resources, and it was a great distance from the populated areas of New Spain. This growing factor of isolation became significant during the 19th century and contributed greatly to the persistence of long-standing Hispanic traditions well into the 20th century.

Life in the Hispanic colony of New Mexico centered around the Catholic faith. The Franciscan friars were responsible for ministering the spiritual needs of the colonists. The friars' goals were to establish a Christian society and to save souls through dedication to Christ and His example of suffering and humility as evidenced by His crucifixion. Their ideals were poverty, charity and obedience. This spirit of piety and devotion to God formed the bulwark of the colony and permeated all facets of Hispanic colonial life.

The core of this religious belief encompassed three stages—penance, love and union. It was believed that the human soul needed to be purified through acts of penance in preparation for sanctification by God's love. Once sanctified, the soul was ready for salvation. Life on earth was looked on as temporary and a place where one prepares the soul for its ultimate goal—salvation and eternal life with God.

In this strong Catholic tradition, images of holy persons and saints played an important role. These paintings and statues were called santos—a Spanish word which means "holy images" or "images of saints." They could be found in every home and church throughout the colony and were cared for and loved by the faithful. People would pray to the particular saint replicated in the image hoping that he or she would intervene on their behalf. For many centuries in both Europe and Latin America, santos were recognized as symbols of piety. To the colonists, they became important visible reminders of man's mortality and his ultimate goal of salvation of his soul.

In New Mexico a distinctive body of simple folk images developed due in part to isolation and flourished for about 100 years (late 18th through late 19th centuries). The santos from the latter part of this period (late 19th century) are the subject of the present exhibition. The images exhibited are from the Taylor Museum for Southwestern Studies of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center—one of the two largest collections of Southwestern santos in existence today.

THE CHANGES

As time went on, outside influences began to exert a presence within New Mexico—especially after the American occupation in 1846. Up until that time, New Mexico was largely a self-sufficient community based on farming and hand work done by local artisans. Most needs such as food, shelter, clothing, tools, and furnishings were produced by hand from local materials. Eventu-
THE PASSION FIGURES

The predominant theme of the santos during the period 1860-1910 (especially the bultos figures) were images associated with the passion and crucifixion of Christ which were used during the Holy Week ceremonies. These figures were not unique to New Mexico but had been used since the late Middle Ages in Spain and throughout Spanish cultural areas in the Americas. The most frequently used figures are:

OUR FATHER JESUS NAZARENE represents Christ during His period of suffering before the crucifixion. He is often shown with His hands bound in front, a crown of thorns on His head, and is clad either in a loin cloth or robes.

CHRIST CRUCIFIED represents Christ with hands and feet nailed to the cross. If its joints were articulated, this figure could be removed from the cross and placed in a wooden, open-sided coffin with handles for carrying in processions. In this form it is known as CHRIST IN THE HOLY SEPULCHRE.

OUR LADY OF SORROWS represents the Blessed Virgin Mary mourning the suffering and crucifixion of Christ. She is usually shown with a dagger at her heart which symbolizes the piercing of her heart with sorrow.

OUR LADY OF SOLITUDE represents the Virgin Mary after the crucifixion. She is dressed in the clothes of a nun which represent the life of pious solitude led by Mary after the death of her Son. Sometimes she is shown holding a veil upon which is imprinted the Holy Face of Christ.

Both of the above bultos can be quite elaborate in their dress having a braided silk belt, a lined cape, a wig, a veil, a beaded crown or lace.

The above were images of penance—reminders to the faithful of Christ's suffering for mankind. Images such as these were used to evoke within the penitent the desire for personal repentance through individual acts of suffering and humility. These images were also seen as profound sources of divine mercy, for through Christ and Mary both earthly blessings and heavenly salvation might be obtained.

THE FIGURES OF DEATH

Another important sculpture used by the hermanos was the carreta de la muerte (death cart). During Holy Week such figures were used in Spain and Latin America in the procession of the descent and burial of Christ. A skeletal figure personify-

Death in Cart/La Muerte en su Carreta,
ing death was placed in a small cart beneath the cross, with inscriptions reading "Death, where is thy victory?" and "Death, I will be thy death." The purpose of the figure is to show that in the exalted funeral procession of Christ, death is not the victor, but rather Christ, who has eternal life at the side of the Father, ultimately triumphs over death.

In New Mexico death figures were kept by the Brotherhood long after they ceased being used in the ceremony of the descent and burial of Christ, and here another important symbolism has been preserved: the death figure serves as a reminder of human mortality. Since the Middle Ages, death personified in theatre, song and pictorial images has inspired the faithful not to attach themselves to worldly things, but rather to lead a pious life and prepare for the inevitability of death. In the morada a figure of death in her cart is often found next to the altar. Formerly, as a form of penance, brothers would drag them during Holy Week up the hill designated as Calvary.

THE SAINTS

While passion figures were predominant in the late 19th century, other Catholic devotions were still of great importance in New Mexico. When commercial images were not available or affordable, local artists made retablos and bultos to represent such popular saints (santos) as San Antonio, Santa Librada, and San José; images of Jesus as the Santo Niño (Holy Child) de Atocha; and of Mary as Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe. These and many other images were found in homes, and they joined both the earlier local santos and the new plaster statues and color prints on the altars of churches and oratorios.

THE SANTEROS

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, each area in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado had its santeros (the makers of santos). After 1860, the primary need was for bultos for the oratorios of the local moradas and for Holy Week ceremonies. Some of these artisans were itinerant and moved from community to community as need dictated. Some of these santeros were:

JOSE BENITO ORTEGA. A prolific artist, Ortega and two helpers worked in northern New Mexico east of the Sangre de Cristo mountains. He made his bultos from flat pieces of milled lumber. As a result, the bodies were flat and extremely stylized, frontal and static in appearance. The face was the same whether male or female, young or old. He most often used a limited palette of red, black and white. Green and yellow were unusual colors for him. The eyes protrude and stare, noses are quite large and the chin is often slightly pointed.

JOSE DE GRACIA GONZALES. The outstanding altar paintings of José de Gracia Gonzales are the major achievement in Hispanic Southwestern religious art in the late 1800s. Gonzales was born about 1835 in Chihuahua, Mexico, and came to New Mexico about 1860 where he found commissions to paint and renovate altar screens in churches in several northern villages, including Las Trampas and Arroyo Seco. Gonzales also made brightly painted bultos, some of them cast in plaster. In the early 1870s he moved with his family to Trinidad, Colorado, where he continued as a painter and sculptor until his death about 1901.
ally, however, Americans from the east brought modern transportation and factory-made products to the formerly isolated area, and traditional methods began to give way to American commerce and capitalism.

Dramatic changes also began to occur within the Church. The new Catholic clergy, primarily of French origin, didn’t care for the local religious art. In addition, commercially made images in the form of chromolithographs and cast plaster statues of saints began to replace the santos. The making of retablos (panel paintings) began to die out. New altar screens were seldom decorated with painted images; instead, niches were built into them to hold the new commercial plaster statues.

As American influence increased, the core of Hispanic community life began to weaken. Some of the people converted to Protestantism while others left the villages to find jobs in other areas. These influences became a real threat to traditional religious values and observances.

**THE BROTHERHOOD**

At this time a group came to the forefront which attempted to preserve traditional values and the cohesiveness of their communities. This group was a Catholic lay confraternity (cofradía) originally known as The Brotherhood of the Sangre de Cristo. Today they are named the Brotherhood of Our Father Jesus Nazarene, popularly known as the Penitentes.

Their devotional activities include prayer, the singing of alabados (hymns) during Lent, processions during Holy Week to reenact the suffering and crucifixion of Christ, and various forms of self-mortification as acts of penance. They also serve as a welfare agency and a burial society providing aid for members, their families, and their communities through monetary assistance, donations of food, labor, help for the sick, vigils for the deceased, and interments. The Brothers (hermanos) are dedicated to living a pious Christian life through devotion to the suffering and crucifixion of Christ, and they keep alive the Holy Week ceremonies in the more isolated villages.

They meet in meeting houses known as moradas that also serve as places of worship. Most moradas are simple in design and have undecorated exteriors. Usually there are two large rooms, plus a small storeroom or a loft. One room is used by the Brothers for meetings, eating and sleeping during Holy Week retreats. The other is used as an oratorio (chapel). In some cases the oratorio is a separate building a short distance from the morada. The santos are carefully preserved in the oratorios or in members’ homes and are used in processions during Holy Week, Corpus Christi, and other times of the year. Today the Brotherhood is still active in many communities in New Mexico and southern Colorado.
THE SANTOS

Santos fall into two categories: santos de retablo and santos de bulto. A retablo is a painting usually done on a board cut from a ponderosa pine log. In such a format, it could be used by itself or as part of an altar screen. A bulto is a three-dimensional painted sculpture varying from one to two feet in height to life-size. They were usually carved from cottonwood because, due to its dense grain, it was less likely than pine to shrink or split over time and its softness made it easy to carve with simple tools.

Both the panels (retablos) and carvings (bultos) were covered with a layer of white gesso (finely ground gypsum that was mixed with wheat paste for binder). This layer made a smooth surface for painting because it filled in any imperfections in the wood.

The next step was to add color with paint. Originally the paint was water-based and the pigments (colors) were derived from various plant and mineral sources. For example, browns were obtained from iron oxides, blues from indigo, yellows from plants like chamisa (rabbit bush), black from carbon, and reds from cinnabar (mercuric sulfide) and cochineal (insects). Gesso was left exposed for white areas. Earlier santos in the 18th century were painted with imported oil paint, and by the late 19th century the water-based painting methods described here were replaced by the use of commercial enamel house paint. Sculptures (bultos) were often repainted due to the frequent handling of the figures during ceremonial occasions.

After painting, the retablos and bultos were covered with a layer of varnish prepared from pine resin. Over time the original brilliant colors became darkened with the aging of the varnish.

The bultos had several other interesting components. The women in the community would sew miniature clothing for them—sometimes meant to be removed or added according to ceremonial dictate, other times meant to be an integral part of the piece. Occasionally the figures had glass eyes, and either human or horse hair was used to create a wig. Lastly, some of the large bultos (especially the figures of Christ) were articulated with jointed shoulders, elbows, knees or necks so that the figure could be placed in various positions according to the progression of the ceremony. One bulto even had a hinged jaw so that it could drop at the appropriate moment in time. The joints were usually made out of leather or cotton cloth and sometimes ropes were used to move the head and torso. Some of the bultos of Christ had holes in the hands and feet for the nails used in the crucifixion. As a result, these carefully crafted bultos could be used in the different re-enactments of Christ's suffering and crucifixion during Holy Week: the last sorrowful encuentro (encounter) of Jesus and Mary; the emprendimiento (seizure) of Jesus; and the crucifixion and descent from the cross.
THE TAOS COUNTY SANTERO. This santero created bultos that were large in size and strongly expressive due to their powerful bodies and facial features. Much attention was paid to Christ’s wounds in the painting of the figures. He also used glass eyes, a characteristic seldom employed by other santeros.

THE ABIQUIU SANTERO. Most of the works by the Abiquiú Santero and his follower have been found or documented in moradas west of the Rio Grande in New Mexico: at Abiquiú and nearby communities. Most of the known pieces in this style are large figures of Christ Crucified and Jesus Nazarene. The work of this artist appears to derive from the dramatic realism of Baroque Mexican passion figures of the late eighteenth century. The figures are extremely expressive: faces have strong features, enlaced by bright colors.

JUAN MIGUEL HERRERA. Herrera came from the village of Arroyo Hondo which is north of Taos. He was assisted by his brother and his son. His most successful pieces have a straightforward, honest quality and a powerful presence.

JUAN RAMON VELAZQUEZ. Velazquez worked in the Rio Arriba area west of the Rio Grande. He was an itinerant artist who moved from village to village working on commission. His work is pure folk art and far removed from naturalism. His faces and bold and have a mask-like simplicity which give them qualities of primitive art.

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Our Lady of Sorrows/Nuestra Señora de los Dolores, José de Gracia Gonzales. Ca. 1860-1900.