OU Santos Exhibit
Naively Appealing

Art Review

NORMAN — There is something naively appealing and a little disturbing as well about the "Images of Penance, Images of Mercy" show of santos from northern New Mexico, Colorado and the University of Oklahoma.

On loan from the Taylor Museum at Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, the "Southwestern Santos" exhibit at OU's Museum of Art contains both paintings on board (crucifixions) and painted wooden sculptures (bultos).

Requiring patient viewing, the exhibit of late 19th-20th-century santos is educational, informative and painstakingly put together by guest curator William Wrobch.

It also is beautifully installed and displayed, transforming the impressionable, secular space of the OU museum into a cloistered, almost shrine-like ambiance.

Rafael Aragon (1796-1862) elongates the legs and stylizes the features to give an ethereal aspect to his painted wooden sculpture of "Saint Anthony," holding a seeming weightless, ageless red-robed Christ child on his arm.

A much more normal-looking Christ child stands between his parents, posed in front of what looks like a theater curtain, in a more naturalistic,Quickly touching paintingon board of "The Holy Family" by Jose Aragon.

A wide variety of painted wooden sculptures even more striking is of crucifixions confronting the viewer, dramatically, on the west wall of the OU museum.

Among the most intriguing are Jose Benito Ortega's late 19th-century sculpture of "St. Achatius," a century's old crucifixion attire figure in a flat-brimmed hat, who is being crucified, along with six smaller figures on a lower bar.

Born in Mora, N.M., Ortega (1858-1941) streamlines the red dress of a naively stylized, archaic painted wooden sculpture of "St. Liberata," being crucified on a cross embellished with a repetitive decorative motif.

A bloody "Jesus Nazarene" carries his own cross on his shoulder, with downcast eyes and hands, in a somber, but heartfelt late 19th-century sculpture by Southern Colorado folk artist Jose de Gracia Gonzales.

Much grimmer and even more striking is Nasario Lopez's mid-19th-century carved wooden sculpture of "Death in Her Cart," a skeleton figure armed with a bow, seemingly about to release her arrow at the viewer.

Hardly less intimidating is an early 20th-century wooden sculpture from a Penitente morada at El Rito, N.M., attributed to Jose Inex Herrera, depicting "Death" as a woman, dressed in black, armed with a strange stick or weapon.

Jose Benito Ortega portrays the Virgin Mary as "Our Lady of Sorrows," dressed in red, expressing her anguish with her large, downcast eyes, and a gestural movement of one hand, over which is drawn across her heart.

Other powerful sculptural works depict her as "Our Lady of Solitude," after the crucifixion, dressed in black as a nun, extending her hands, palms up, toward the viewer, as a gesture of mercy, consolation and acceptance.

Paintings on cotton, done in a naive realistic style, include one of "Our Lady of Guadalupe," hands clasped in prayer, sheltered by her own garments, and another of Saint Joseph, as conquering temptation.

The exhibit also contains a selection of santos done in recent decades or by contemporary artists — most of which hold up surprisingly well when compared with earlier efforts.

These include a carving of "Our Lady of Light," decorated with cross and sun imagery rather than paint, done in 1934 by Jose Dolores Lopez, and a painted wooden sculpture of "St. Joseph," done in 1991, by Felix Lopez.

Supported by a variety of related programs, the "Images of Penance, Images of Mercy: Santos and Ceremonies of the Hispanic Southwest" exhibit runs through March 16.

— John Brandenburg

Skid Row Coming to City

ROCKERS Skid Row will perform March 22 at the Myriad Convention Center Exhibition Hall.

The band is touring in support of its current album "Slave to the Grind," which has spawned two singles, "Slave to the Grind," and "Monkey Business." Opening the show will be Pantera.

Tickets go on sale Saturday at all Ticket Source outlets.