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Introduction



Since the colonization of New Mexico, periodic surveys have been made of the contents of the region's churches. One of the early surveys was that by Bishop Tamaron in 1760. To update information about the existence and condition of religious art in churches of northern New Mexico and related collections, in September of 1987 photographer Jack Parsons and I undertook a photographic survey of the religious folk art and other Spanish Colonial folk arts in the village churches and chapels of northern New Mexico. Initially, the Folk Arts Division of the National Endowment for the Arts funded us, and later we received assistance from the New Mexico Arts Division in Santa Fe and several private donors, to whom we are grateful.

We started at Questa, one of the northernmost villages in New Mexico, and concluded our work more than two years later in the towns and pueblos south of Santa Fe. By the end of the survey, we had measured, examined for condition, identified by artist, and photographed more than

500 *retablos* (panel paintings), *bultos* (statues), altar screens, and tinwork items. Besides studying the churches and chapels, we surveyed many of the *moradas* (chapter houses of the penitent Brotherhood of Our Father Jesus the Nazarene) in the region. Several of the Brothers in charge of certain *moradas* opted not to take advantage of our survey but to document the *santos* themselves. After we inventoried the northern churches, chapels, and *moradas*, we documented the Archdiocese of Santa Fe (ASF) collection on loan to the Museum of International Folk Art (MOIFA) in Santa Fe.

The purpose of the survey was twofold. First, the survey was primarily to document the collections housed in the Pueblo missions, parish churches, chapels, and *moradas* for comparison to the results of previous surveys, such as the 1776 survey done by Fray Francisco Atanasio Dominguez (see Appendix C). This information, we hoped, would be valuable to historians. Second, we wished to provide the Archdiocese of Santa Fe with an

accurate and complete listing of these sacred items in order to deter theft. Over the past twenty or thirty years, numerous thefts had occurred, both from the *moradas* and from the churches and chapels, causing a great loss not only to the villagers but to the wider community as well. Several recent thefts of *santos* had remained unsolved because of a lack of documentation to prove the existence or ownership of the stolen items. Thus, the Archdiocese of Santa Fe indirectly benefited from the survey, and artists, historians, other scholars, and all aficionados of the *santos* will be able to make use of the plethora of new information available from this undertaking. The photo-documentation of these articles will help in maintaining adequate records of this regional colonial art and properly safeguard the items.

In addition, the results of our survey will help local officials maintain the churches of northern New Mexico. These churches and chapels, like the *acequias* (irrigation ditches), have always operated under a *mayordomo* system, whereby parishioners elect officials to serve one-year terms as caretakers of the village church or chapel and all its furnishings. To aid the caretakers in this task, our survey provided each parish priest with slides of all the art in his parish church and chapels and gave the *mayordomos* a set of color prints to help them establish records of the church furnishings. Working together, priests and *mayordomos* will

form a network for continuously monitoring the artifacts in each house of worship, thereby curtailing the number of thefts. Since the beginning of the survey only two pieces have been stolen from the churches and chapels, and both were recovered because authorities were able to immediately provide good photos, accurate descriptions, and measurements to the police and the media.

The survey had educational benefits as well: an abundance of information not previously available. We had the good fortune to make some important discoveries about several nineteenth-century tinsmiths, and provided that information to authors who were publishing books on the subject; in addition we verified the existence of several eighteenth- and nineteenth-century *carpinteros*, and an eighteenth-century carver of *bultos* previously thought only to have made *retablos*. Later research produced the tentative identification of two *santeros*, who had previously been thought to be anonymous, as Franciscan friars.

Identifying the works of certain *santeros* proved to be a challenge—as it has been for others who conducted surveys in the past. There is, of course, great variation in the styles of known *santeros*, but variations within a single *santero*'s style may also occur. These variations can be attributed to several factors: the *santero* was unable to devote sufficient time to the piece because of other commitments; an apprentice carved and

painted the work under the santero's supervision; or an apprentice carved the santo, and the santero painted it. Because of such subtle variations in style, historians have sometimes attributed certain works to a school of the known santero or to an "anonymous" santero. Nevertheless, there are subtle variations in the style of the same artist in every category of art. Therefore, to attribute works to one artist, it is necessary to determine which pieces contain the most significant known traits of the artist and compare other works with these. (As with any carving, a larger piece will generally possess more of the recognizable traits of a given santero's style, because more gessoed area is covered.)

Despite all the information we accumulated, to us the survey was more a spiritual pilgrimage than routine documentation, for at times we caught wonderful glimpses of the essence of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century churches, their altars and art, their artists

and parishioners. We reverently held and examined santos that had adorned altars for as long as two and a half centuries—santos that had witnessed the continual changes in the buildings that still house them and in the social communities that still venerate them. Time after time we entered churches and saw the sunlight streaming through lace curtains, shadows dancing on the saints as we attempted to photograph them, layers and layers of clothing lovingly placed on these figures by the women of the church, along with bobby pins and real hair wigs.

This book includes new information about the images documented and the identity of two santeros previously known only as "anonymous." It illustrates many of the santos we encountered as we traversed the winding and sometimes muddy roads of remote villages (as well as many in private collections). The santos are, indeed, enduring images of northern New Mexican village churches.