

SANTOS: RELIGIOUS FOLK ART OF NEW
MEXICO, 1750 TO 1850

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PREFACE

This study was begun out of a sincere love for the art of the santos. It will cover the santos' beginnings in New Mexico around 1750 and discuss the historical causes for both the santos' rise to popularity and their later demise. This study will attempt to cover all of the factors that had an effect on their creation and style and to discuss what the santos' contribution to folk art in America might be.

The writer wishes to express her sincere gratitude to her major adviser, Christine Salmon, without whose guidance, encouragement, and friendship this study might not have been completed. The writer will always feel indebted to her for her time and patience throughout this writing.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Religious art has taken many forms throughout the ages; such as, golden madonnas, bells, music Quaker furniture, and Santos. Santos are figurative depictions of religious subjects or saints. They are most often a favorite saint or a member of the Holy Family. Santos take two forms: bultos, which are sculptures or figures in the round, and retablos, which are flat, two-dimensional representations, usually on pine boards. A man who made altar pieces and statues or retablos in Colonial New Mexico was referred to as a santero. The work of the santeros is generally referred to as the Santero School of Art.

Santos are an expression of Roman Catholicism, and are related to Spanish religious expressions in form but not in style. The concept did in fact begin in Spain. From there, it went to Mexico as it was colonized, and from Mexico on up with the Franciscan friars as they settled New Mexico. The subject of this study exclusively pertains to New Mexican Santos of the period 1750 to 1850.

The arts of the Spanish in New Mexico reflect not only the background and sensibilities of their creators but also the difficult history of life on the frontier. New Mexico

was a dangerous and turbulent outpost of the Spanish Crown long before the pilgrims landed. The Spanish came seeking gold and with dreams of wealth. They soon learned that there was no gold and that the Indians did not welcome these intruders to their homeland. After 1680, when the Pueblo Indians revolted, the worst was over. But even after the reconquest of New Mexico by Diego de Vargas in 1692, the Utes, Apaches, Comanches, and Navahos made regular intrusions upon the established Spanish settlements. As a result, although the Spanish colonized New Mexico in the sixteenth century, the Spanish population remained isolated and impoverished into the nineteenth century (Mather, 1978).

The earliest and for many years only artistic achievements of the Spanish were architectural. Their seventeenth century mission churches were quite impressive. During the Pueblo revolt, the interior decorations of these churches were destroyed but they were believed to have had wall paintings at this time (Mather, 1978).

The second phase of artistic endeavor followed the reconquest by de Vargas in 1692 and continued until about 1810. It was a period of rebuilding and as in years before the Pueblo Revolt, the arts were dependent upon the church. Religious imagery was essential to converting the native population, and this task of creating it fell to the clergy. Like the Pueblo Indians who preceded them, the Spanish, while knowing something of the culture and materials of the Mexican craftsmen, lacked their resources and skill. "So

Spanish New Mexican art, while reflecting an awareness of Mexican art, is nonetheless at one removed from it" (Mather, 1978, p. 424).

The third phase of the artistic life of New Mexico comprises a rich folk art tradition marked by the involvement of committed amateurs in the arts. This tradition touched the lives of all Spanish New Mexicans and it is to this tradition that santos belong.

The writer was compelled to begin this study out of a keen love and appreciation of the area of northern New Mexico. The New Mexican Colonial folk arts of which santos are a part, have always been of interest to the writer because they are not art for art's sake but were a full part of the lives of the artist who created them. Santos themselves were created out of a great emotional and spiritual need. They were an art form created by the people themselves, for themselves and as such, they reflect that emotion and that commitment. The art of the New Mexican santeros owes its beginning to a Spanish and Mexican heritage, but it has its own integrity. Priests initiated the art, but it was the people themselves making bultos and retablos for their churches, homes, and family chapels who gave it the characteristics for which it is known. They were primitive works, yet they were incredibly powerful in their ability to convey their message, perhaps because they reflect so clearly the craftsman who created them, his

adeptness or ineptness of skill, his commitment to his spiritual heritage, and still, his love for life that they make so appealing a statement.

The craftsmen in Colonial New Mexico worked in isolation essentially from the rest of the world, and this isolation, rather than leading to a degeneration of familiar elements in his creation of the santos, in this case led instead to a reworking of these elements. The results, far from being a dull or weakened form of the old concepts, are instead a vital new original folk art (Mills, 1967).

The writer felt that not enough significance or attention had been given to santos when one realizes that they are one of the only art forms truly unique to North America. The writer wished to discover the conditions and reasons why this artistic event occurred at this time and place and why this event was so closely contained within the time frame of 1750 to 1850.

To begin this study, the writer made many trips to the Santa Fe area in the past few years to see the figures as they were exhibited in different museums and churches. The writer visited an exhibit at the International Folk Art Museum, Dias de Mas, Dias de Menos, in 1977. This exhibit, which opened October 17, 1976, brought together more than six hundred bultos and retablos from many of the significant collections still extant. Christine Mather, curator of Spanish Colonial art at the Museum of International Folk

Art, referred to the exhibit as representative of a "culture in which life and art were integrated" (Mather, 1976, p. 25).

This writer attempted to view the similarities and differences in styles between the different santeros' works and to compare and contrast bultos and retablos as well as to view santos as a whole in contrast to other folk arts of the area at that time. In doing this comparison the writer became even more aware of how really unique an expression this art form is.

The writer next began a review of the literature. The major portion of the work done on the subject of santos was done by E. Boyd, who was a curator emeritus at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe. Her last publication before her death in 1974 was the Popular Arts of Spanish New Mexico. This work has the most recent and most extensive information that has been published on the subject of santos. The writer's final step was to assess the information available, to compare it and contrast it to her own observations, and, finally, to draw conclusions.

The purpose of this study will be to research the historical setting and aspects of the time of the santero, to explore the spiritual conditions that affected him, and to recognize santos as one of America's truly unique and indigenous folk arts. The writer hoped to contribute to this recognition through her research and study.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

One of the earliest publications on santos is the Taylor Museum book, Santos, the Religious Folk Art of New Mexico by Wilder and Breitenbach, published in 1943. This was published in conjunction with the acquisition of the Applegate collection of santos by the Taylor Museum. This book primarily shows photographs of significant examples from the collection. The writers, however, do touch briefly on the historical background of the santos and briefly on the artistic background.

In 1946 another booklet was printed, also in conjunction with an exhibit of santos, Santos, a Primitive American Art, by Willard Houghland. Mr. Houghland touches briefly on the setting of New Mexico in 1750 and then discusses who the santeros were and finally, specific datings of the santos. He concludes with a few paragraphs on how the availability of commercial santos caused the homemade variety to be no longer in demand.

In 1946, E. Boyd published her first book on the santos, Saints and Saintmakers. This is really the first significant publication on the subject. E. Boyd worked with the santos at the Museum of American Folk Art in Santa Fe

as a curator and she was the first to try to discover which santos were made by specific santeros. Boyd was able at this time to classify and identify works done by ten major santeros. Her classifications were based on style as well as dating by every available method.

Saints in the Valleys, by Jose Espinoza, was first published in 1960 but was revised in 1967. He discusses the santos from a historical and political perspective. Much of his information was drawn from Boyd, including the classification of the santeros.

George Kubler's publication, Santos, for the Amon Carter Museum in 1964, divided the artistic arrangement of Latin America into seven regions. One of these, New Mexico, stood alone in the seventeenth century. Most painting and sculpture until 1750 was supplied to the area by Mexico. After that, art was supplied for about a century by local artisans who developed a religious artistic expression all their own. This class of work he described as "folk art." It could be interpreted as an expression of release in a time between agrarian feudalism in the eighteenth century and industrial mass production at the end of the nineteenth. New Mexico, after 1750, was one of the last holdouts to a Christian imagery that began in the Middle Ages. Because of this it deserves our attention.

E. Boyd published a short article on "New Mexico Folk Arts in Art History," in El Palacio in 1965. This is the

only discussion found concerning the santos as an art form and their classification as such by Boyd. Boyd's other discussions seem to consist primarily of scientific analysis and dating. The distinction between folk art, fine art, and primitive art she has found in museum collections of all three categories. Primitive art defined by Ralph Linton and quoted by Boyd, stated "to the people who made what we call primitive art, it was not primitive; it was the only form of art that existed for them because they did not know any other" (Boyd, 1965, p. 10). Fine arts were considered to be products of formally trained artists within a framework of their own traditions.

True folk arts were made by rural areas isolated from changing styles. They were mass produced but each was as distinctive, though similar, as differences in handwriting. This would lead one to categorize Spanish Colonial arts of New Mexico as a folk art. They were for generations removed from urban centers. In little more than one generation, three dimensional painting was discarded for single plane, linear construction and static poses. Most santeros were anonymous, though they have been identified to some extent. They were true folk artists, not in any sense provincial copyists.

E. Boyd's final work on the santos, Popular Arts of Spanish New Mexico (1974), presents the culmination of her study and is the definitive work on santos to this date.

She explores in depth specific santeros and their work, including reclassifying and regrouping some of her original premises as presented in Saints and Saintmakers. She discusses major pieces and their restoration. Style is discussed only as far as it relates to identification. Her work can not be underestimated and this book must be considered the most extensive firsthand study made of the santos.

In nearly every discussion of the santos with the exception of a very few, one is overwhelmed with historical, geographical background, and scientific analysis of materials and dating. It would seem nearly all of the studies are missing what may be the true impact of the santos themselves.

Their impact would lie in their direct emotional effect on the observer. This emotional response made the santos a potent factor in the lives of the people of that time and makes them as appealing today. The santos are at times incredibly beautiful and at times completely homely, yet there remains such a poignancy that one can not deny that they demand an emotional response from the observer. To the people who made them and cherished them, they became like their own children, sometimes loved and cherished, sometimes punished for being naughty. They were not an austere art object but were a common, everyday part of their lives. This everydayness, this almost real,

almost human quality about them is undiscussed, and yet this very fact is what confronts the observer first and foremost. One feels that this is, in fact, where their greatest impact lies. The fingerprint and love of the craftsman who created them is as much in evidence today to the observer as it was then.

CHAPTER III

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the year 1540, Spanish colonization of the Southwest was begun. The first New Mexican colonists arrived at San Juan Pueblo in 1598. The Spanish were as much interested in converts to Catholicism as they were to increasing their territories, so priests were always included in each group of soldiers and colonists that set out. The first colonists found life almost intolerable, and in 1601, almost deserted. New expeditions, however, were sent out, and by 1608, things were improving. The capital was moved from San Juan to San Gabriel and finally in 1610 to Santa Fe. The new capital, however, was hardly self sufficient and as new missions were being built, religious art for them was supplied primarily through Mexico. Often this art was in the form of paintings on animal hides executed sometimes by the friars themselves. These Franciscan friars felt that with a barrier of language and illiteracy between themselves and the Indians, pictures would be an invaluable aid in their conversions.

In August, 1680, the Pueblo Indians, who had long resented their exploitation by the Spanish, revolted. Four hundred Spanish, including 21 Franciscans, were killed

(Espinoza, 1960). Everyone who was not an Indian was either burned or driven out and any remains of their culture was burned. This included all churches and missions. Most religious art that had made its way to the new colonies from Mexico was certainly destroyed at this time.

Many unsuccessful attempts were made between 1680 to 1692 to reconquer New Mexico, but it was not until 1692-1693 that DeVargas was successful. At this time, De Vargas inventoried and itemized all religious art remaining in the area. None of these were by local craftsmanship, so one might assume from this that santos might not be dated prior to 1693 (Boyd, 1975a).

After the conquest, the rebuilding began. As Spain began to lose strength and interest in the colonies, the capital, Santa Fe, began to feel more and more isolated. What little trade they once could depend on lessened even further. The colonists began to realize that they must depend solely on their own self reliance.

The one cultural force that remained strong in this isolated area was the Catholic church. Life could literally not begin or end without the church. Every church, mission, and home had to have its patron saint or saints. This was a way of life totally engrained in these displaced Spaniards. But the supply of religious art from Mexico decreased twice as fast as the population and the demand for religious art in the colonies increased (Wilder and Breitenbach, 1943).

The Franciscan friars found the solution in their own hands and talents. They began creating representations of the saints with their own hands. The need for these sacred objects, however, soon outgrew the friars' abilities to produce. Sometime during the third quarter of the eighteenth century, the first folk arts appeared as selected members of the laity began to learn the art of saintmaking from the friars (Espinoza, 1960). These men, who fashioned altarpieces, statues, and painted panels of saints were called santeros. At this time, the Santero School of Art was begun.

The santeros had no academic training but learned quickly to use the local media, cottonwood and other softwoods, gesso, and mineral pigments to create their sacred objects. These they referred to as santos.

Santos are of two kinds: bultos and retablos. Bultos are the three-dimensional figures carved in the round. Retablos are flat paintings usually on boards. Boyd (1975a) says,

Gilberto Espinosa gives the following description of media and method used in bulito making: 'In the making of his bultos, the santero generally used cottonwood. This was soft and could be easily shaped. For the smaller bultos, he used the yet softer root of the cottonwood. First he would carve his form. Very seldom was the carved image made in one piece. The head, arms, and legs were separately carved and then joined with a gelatinous glue made by boiling cow's horns and cow's hooves in water for several days. When this dried, it gave a hard surface. There was next applied a mixture made

of this same glue and yeso, a form of gypsum generally distributed throughout New Mexico. After this had dried, it was carefully sanded with pumice stone and shaped to satisfaction. Successive coatings of yeso were applied and each coat sanded until the santero was satisfied. Then the object was painted.

The New Mexico santero worked exclusively with earth and vegetable colors. He never worked with oil paints as is commonly believed. He learned his vegetable and earth colors from the Indians who used to mix their war paint. The earth colors, oxides, and ochres were mixed with egg yolk, one part to ten of color and water mixed to thin. This was applied as tempera paint. When dry, it was given a coating of egg white to waterproof it. If a particularly lustrous surface was designed, it was often burnished with a knob of glass or a similar object. Often the santo, when finished, was rubbed with mutton tallow. With time the greasy appearance disappeared, leaving the excessive yellows and browns we frequently see in old santos' (pp. 5-6).

Because the santeros were untrained, and because they worked to please their own eye and used very simple tools and materials, their results were more often than not very primitive. They had no concept of the proportions of anatomy or of perspective, but they were working from a memory of Spanish baroque ecclesiastical art and it is this blend of their primitive techniques and materials with a baroque tradition that helped make this santero school totally unique and incredibly charming.

Some santeros were itinerant artists who traveled from village to village peddling their products or even taking commissions. The better craftsmen developed their own style and it is through these styles that we are able

today to distinguish the work of one artist from another. Santos were almost never signed. The individual artists have become lost, living now only through their creations.

Boyd (1946), who did extensive work on the classification of retablos, has identified specifically ten santeros who have left enough samples behind to be identified, if not by name, at least by work. A later work on the same subject by Espinoza (1960) credits Boyd with identifying ten painters, and he added two more to the list.

1. The Laguna Painter (1775-1880) was named after the incredible reredo (altarpiece) which he created for the church at the Laguna Pueblo. It is considered to be one of the finest surviving examples of santero art.

2. The Calligraphic Santero or Pedro Antonio Fresquis (1800-1830) was so called because he used graffito ornamentation, incising into the paint and still wet gesso ground stars, scrolls, and vines that added texture to his panels. His work was spontaneous, uncorrected, and almost abstract. Boyd (1974) was able to establish Fresquis' name through a document that came to light in connection with the church at Las Truchas. Boyd found Fresquis' style to be one of the most original known santeros and one not copied by later artists.

3. The Chili Painter or Jose Molleno was so called because he used red spacefillers in his panels that suggested ripe chili peppers. Boyd (1974) believed he was

the one folk artist who carried to the ultimate the rejection of the two-dimensional plane and realism. He worked between 1804 and 1845 and was very popular and prolific.

4. The Anonymous "Santo Nino" Santero (1820-1840), was so called because he made a number of images of the Christ Child. His compositions are simple, uncluttered, and proficient. There is usually a single figure on a white, or pastel, ground. His gesso and pigments are so well prepared that Boyd (1974) felt he might have had some artistic experience. He also made gracefully proportioned bultos, some of them hollow frame statues of the Virgin.

5. Jose Aragon (1820-1840) was one of the few santeros who did sign and date his work. Boyd (1974) found at least ten significant surviving works which she attributed to him.

6. Jose Raphael Aragon (1830-1850) was one of the great folk panel painters. He lived for most of his life at what is now Cordova, New Mexico. In fact, the altar-screen at the Cordova church is one of his signed works.

7. Miguel Aragon (1835-1855) had his works for a long time confused with that of Jose Raphael. He may have, in fact, been Jose Raphael's son, but even Boyd (1974) finds that to be only conjecture.

8. A fourth Aragon (1835-1860), whose works show similarities to the other three Aragons.



Source: Popular Arts of Spanish New Mexico, E. Boyd,
1974.

Figure 1. Nuestra Señora de San Juan de los Lagos by the
Santo Nino santero



Source: Popular Arts of Spanish New Mexico, E. Boyd,
1974.

Figure 2. San Jose by Jose Molleno



Source: Popular Arts of Spanish New Mexico, E. Boyd,
1974.

Figure 3. Santa Librada by Jose Aragon

9. The A. J. Santero was given such a name because of one panel which has his initials in the corner. Boyd found his style to be easily identifiable. His gesso ground was thick and gritty. The bultos identified as by "A. J." have the same Mongoloid type of face as on his retablos, peculiar coloring, and odd head coverings on the male subjects (Boyd, 1974).

10. The Dot-Dash Painter was identified by the dots and dashes that decorated the corners and unoccupied areas of his boards. The figures are mostly outlines and rather monotonous. His retablos have been discussed as possibly being the work of Jose Aragon, but Boyd (1974) feels that the works are much too coarse to have been Aragon's but may have been done by an apprentice or an admirer.

11. The Quill Pen Painter (1835-1855) was so named by Boyd (1974) because he used a sharp hard object to draw outlines and fine lines on his boards. He drew shoe button eyes with elliptical lids on his figures and long jaws. His work is not well composed or symmetrical.

12. The Floral Painter (1850-1870) drew leafy designs and floral motifs as borders on his works.

The bultos are not as easily classified as the retablos. So many of the remaining figures have been restored and repainted that it is hard to distinguish how much of the work was original.

In 1851, Bishop Lamy was sent from Europe to Santa Fe to head that diocese. The New Mexican area's contact with

the Catholic church over the past years had been limited to one archbishop, the Archbishop of Durango, who visited the area no more often than once every ten years, and several less than honest Franciscans who ruled far too many people and too much land to be able to have any real control or set any standards. When the Vatican created a separate diocese from Durango for Santa Fe and sent Bishop Lamy, he was placed in charge of all Catholics west of St. Louis and north of El Paso. Being a European, Lamy condemned the crudeness of many of the churches as unfit for mass, and he saw the santos as idols. He believed they had come to represent, in the eyes of the people, virtue itself rather than in the abstract. He ordered all santos destroyed. The ones that have survived were preserved either by priests who hated Lamy and defied his orders, or by private citizens who preserved their own personal santos. The Penitentes too, a brotherhood of rather radical believers, kept their santos and continued to hold private ceremonies in their moradas (meeting houses) in spite of the new bishop.

When santos were first made, it was to satisfy a definite need in the absence of commercial objects. As the Santa Fe Trail opened up, trading increased and commercially produced objects once again became available. The homemade variety became less and less in demand. As travel became easier, and children went away for their education,

they began to feel that their life at home was far too primitive (Houghland, 1946). As a result, the Spaniards themselves encouraged destruction of the santos, to be replaced by commercially made plaster figures.

Some parishioners believed that the burning of a santo helped to spare them from disaster or would save their crops. Santos were destroyed by the devout to avoid drastic consequences.

All of these factors contributed to the death of the santero school. It was an art form unique in time and place, that had been made possible by the isolation of the people. The lack of contact with the rest of the world forced the New Mexicans to draw on their own experiences for inspiration and expression. Its very development hinged on the fact that it was saved from the baroque European tradition by lack of outside contact. Had trade with Mexico continued or begun any sooner, the santero school might have felt its influence and been relegated to a mediocrity that it escaped by its isolation.

CHAPTER IV
SPIRITUAL BACKGROUND AND STYLE OF
THE SANTOS

The spiritual background of the santos is even more complex than the historical background. Religion and family were inseparable in the life of the Spanish American. Children were given names of various saints. They celebrated not only their own birthdays but also their saint's day. Santos represented to them their special saint. The santos were so much a part of their lives that they were given real hair, glass or selenite for eyes, and imitation fingernails. The New Mexican believed that they could manipulate the powers of the saints to bring about rain or prevent a flood. Each saint had a special job to do. If the saint did not do its job, then it was "punished" by being turned to the wall or even locked in a trunk. Likewise, they would be rewarded for good happenings by gifts of new clothes, candles, candy, or other personal gifts.

The Catholic religion in New Mexico was greatly influenced by the Franciscan friars. They patterned their beliefs and their lives after that of St. Francis, who was the first saint to manifest stigmata. He sought identification with the Lord through humility and suffering. This was the temper of Christianity in New Mexico.

This aspect of the culture produced a need to show suffering so urgent that it spilled over from a realistic reenactment of Christ's suffering into one of the most powerful folk arts to be found within the borders (Mills, 1967, p. 60).

Saints were always depicted with two main classes of objects: symbols and attributes (Espinoza, 1960). Symbols refer to abstract qualities such as piety or purity. Attributes refer to objects related to each saint's personal history or legend. To be called an attribute, the object must be shown with the figure; for example, the lily with the Virgin Mary symbolizes her purity. Very often, old retablos and bultos were identified as to saints by their attributes alone (Espinoza, 1960).

Some saints were more popular among the Spanish Americans than others. Saint Isidre, the farmer, was the patron saint of farmers who asked for his help with the crops. They expected his intercession for everything from plagues of insects to floods. Santo Nino de Atocha or the Christ Child himself was another favorite. Our Lady of Guadalupe and San Acacio were others. Some figures of Christ were made to drip red wax from wounds in the side to simulate real blood. Most were elaborately dressed.

Essentially, santos served two functions for the people of New Mexico. In a church with few literate people to read the gospel and even fewer priests, drama was used

to keep the world alive. Lifesize articulated figures of Christ were used to reenact the Crucifixion. The figure would be fixed to a cross on Good Friday, then taken down and placed in a casket representing the tomb.

George Mills (1967) quotes the Cleofas Jaramillos account:

Under the altar lay 'El Santo Entierro,' Christ in the Holy Sepulchre, in a long box with open grating in front. On Holy Friday, when the statue was brought out at three o'clock, the jaws were made to open and shut, simulating a person in his last agony (p. 61).

Religion provided for the people of New Mexico one of their few emotional outlets (Wilder and Breitenbach, 1943). Great church festivals took place in which the whole population became involved and large figures or bultos were carried through the streets. Religious scenes were reenacted vividly and dramatically. Even today on the Sunday following Corpus Christi, the image of La Conquistadora is carried in procession from St. Francis Cathedral to Nuestra Senora del Rosario on the outskirts of Santa Fe, where she remains for eight days. The santo figures bridged the gap between art and the real world.

The santos' other major function was to receive the prayers and petitions of the worshippers. Santos were receptive in their static nature and their symmetry. The figures were often contained within niches separating them from the rest of the world. Retablos were framed elaborately to isolate them even further from everything around them, except for the worshipper himself.

Niches or nichos were made of either wood or tin. Tin came from oil cans that were brought in after the American occupation. Tin nichos were decorated with glass that was painted and then had designs drawn in the paint with a comb. They were also decorated with scraps of wallpaper or advertisements. Elaborate frames in tin were made for the retablos from similar materials.

Santos for the Spanish American put art to work in the real world. They did not separate the saints as art from their everyday life; they were rather a vital and essential part of it. Santos were a means by which the faithful could communicate directly with a holy person.

The santos

were not spiritual sculptures in the historic sense but were meant to be used for occasions of great and intense proportions . . . they are not necessarily images, but they embody a fleeting sense of consciousness which has to do with both the human and the divine. They attempt to recreate the incident and thus to inspire the beholder. All of this is not only an act of art, but an act of faith (Houghland, 1946, p. 5).

From an aesthetic viewpoint, santos are truly one of the most indigenous art forms in the United States. Until around 1750 most sculpture and painting was supplied to the New Mexican area by Mexico. After that, their artistic needs were met by a few artisans who were sufficiently acquainted with a history of images and symbols well enough to produce around 100 years of powerful religious artistic

expressions long after any influence from Europe had become but a vague memory (Kubler, 1964).

Because this art form grew in a rural setting, it was isolated from urban influences and changing styles. Works were made most often by anonymous artists for friends, family, or their own parish rather than for money. They were made for religious and ceremonial purposes, not for a livelihood. They were made for the people, for the masses, not for the individual (Boyd, 1965). The forms, designs, and symbols were often similar, yet each was as distinct and personal as handwriting. In little more than one generation, three-dimensional painting was discarded for single plane pictures, linear design, and static poses. Unlike art in an urban area that develops from primitive to baroque, it became more simplified (Boyd, 1965) as it developed. Yet, its style was unmistakable. No one who has compared New Mexican santos with those of Europe or Central America will ever confuse the two (Kubler, 1964).

The figures were characterized by elongated proportions. The frontal view was dominant. Much attention was given to facial features and expressions. Mica eyes and real hair or lashes were often added. Mouths were sometimes half open so teeth and tongue were visible. The rest of the figure was usually clothed in a long, sculptured garment so no representation of feet or legs was necessary. The hands were shown either praying or

expressing grief or merely used to hold attributes (Wilder and Breitenbach, 1943).

Retablos, however, were as far from lifelike representations as can be imagined. They were frontal or three-quarter views and were usually fore-shortened and totally without perspective. The figure was often just an outline filled in with a few simple colors. Very simplified patterns were used to fill in areas, backgrounds, and borders. In spite of the differences in the two forms the santos took, there is still a great similarity in style, expression, and color between bultos and retablos. In both forms, physical proportions were discarded in favor of spiritual proportions.

As Bishop Lamy's influence began to be felt, and as industry began to work its way into the area by way of the Santa Fe Trail which opened in 1821, the art began to die out. It survived its isolation, in fact flourished because of it, but could not survive the new ways of thinking, new technology, and the commercial alternative that trade brought.

Although the subject matter and function of New Mexican religious folk art was squarely within the long tradition of Spanish and Spanish colonial art, its style in the latter part of the eighteenth and first of the nineteenth century was not. "The most significant feature was the rejection of the Renaissance concepts of space

and realism in favor of abstraction and outline" (Mather, 1978, p. 425). It was an art contained within a time and place that developed out of the emotional needs of the people but reflected totally their own individual aesthetics.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Santos became a part of Colonial New Mexico because they had been part of the religious heritage that the Spanish and Mexicans brought with them when they came to New Mexico. The Franciscans believed that the santos would be visual aids in converting the illiterate Indians. These objects of religious art were provided by Mexico at first, but as Spain began to lose interest and the colonies became more and more isolated, trade lessened and the colonists were forced to rely on themselves for any religious art.

The friars were the first ones to try their hands at santo making but, by the end of the eighteenth century, the people themselves had begun to carve them. These santeros were completely untrained, relying on their own sense of style and composition to create these first New Mexican santos. Their results were primitive but in the making of both the bultos and retablos they began to develop a style completely their own.

This style consisted of linear design, static poses, single plane perspective, elongated proportions, and frontal views. The figures are strictly stylized rather than lifelike and simplified rather than complex. In

spite of the long tradition of Spanish and Mexican art out of which New Mexican santos grew, they developed into a folk art totally removed stylistically from any others.

The santos were of great significance to the people of Colonial New Mexico, for religion and family were inseparable. The Catholic church controlled every phase of their lives and for them the santos were representative of the church itself.

The santos served two functions. The first was to keep the Word alive through drama because most of the worshipers were illiterate. The santos were used to reenact the Crucifixion and illustrate the stories the priests told. They provided an emotional outlet for the people during these festivals and reenactments.

Their second function was to receive the prayers and petitions of the worshipers. The Colonial New Mexican could relate to and feel comforted by praying to these figures more easily than praying to abstract saints. Almost every room in a Colonial New Mexican house contained a santo. The people asked of the santos everything from a good harvest to help for a sick child or aid in childbirth. The Colonial New Mexican family firmly believed too that his prayers were answered, and if they were not, the santo might be held responsible and punished.

Because santos developed in isolation and in a sense were born of that isolation, trade, expansion, and the

arrival of new blood in the church were the causes of their demise. When the Santa Fe Trail opened up and commercial products were once again available, the santos began to seem crude in comparison. Why cling to a primitive homemade figure when a shiny, mass-produced, store purchased one was now available?

Bishop Lamy, upon his arrival, found the people's devotion to their santos more than a little too much. He felt they had come to be a holy object in the people's minds rather than to represent one. He ordered the santos destroyed and tried to bring the style of things ecclesiastical back to the baroque European traditions with which he was comfortable. Combining these two factors with the belief the people themselves had that burning or destroying the santos would protect them from a disaster of one sort or another quickly led to the destruction of many if not most of the santos. Those that remained were discarded or put away in a trunk and forgotten. It is due only to some museums and curators in the early part of this century who recognized the significance of the santos that we have so many examples preserved and protected today.

Santos are the only form of ecclesiastical art that is indigenous to the United States (Houghland, 1946). This historic fact alone, separate from the aesthetic qualities, makes them an art form worthy of significance.

As significant as they are in an historical time frame, aesthetically, the santos are ever exciting and refreshing. Their appeal is tied up in a jumble of conjecture, wonder, and legend. They have come to occupy a position somewhat like that of a folk tale that is capable of infinite expansion and embellishment (Houghland, 1946). Their main significance may be found in a personal response. The santeros were, in fact, journalists of the human condition. Their style may be primitive and crude but its spontaneity and sensitivity has captured a very tender note of that which is human. This is their true message, and our response to it may be a smile or a shudder, but it is seldom apathetic. Their emotional impact can not be denied or separated from their historical significance as art objects.

Men who created the carved and painted saint figures not only unwittingly were demonstrating their mastery over the world and the raw materials around them; they were able to stand on tiptoe a little to reach toward heaven.

Maurice Ries
(Boyd, 1946, p. vi).

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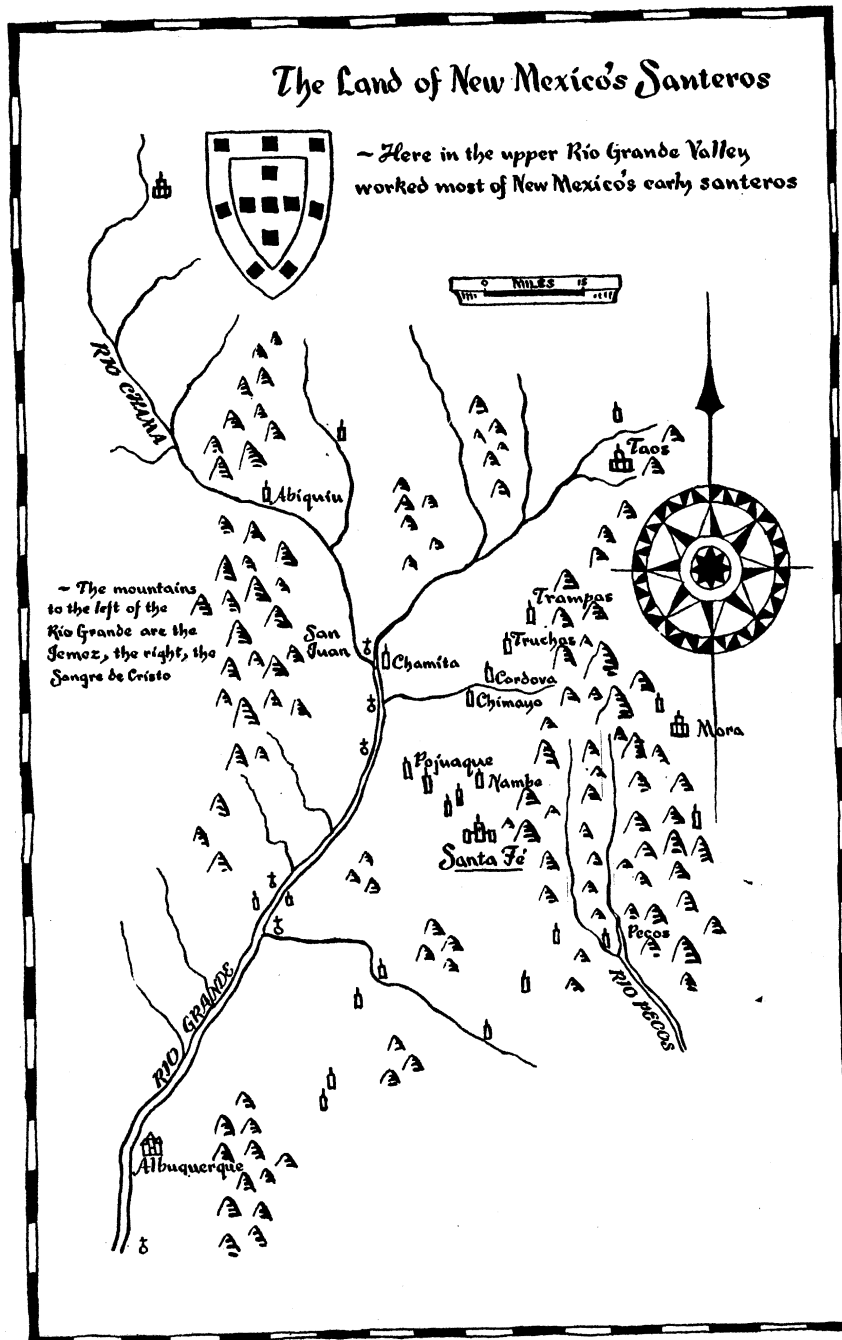
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APPENDIX

MAP OF THE AREA OF NORTHERN NEW MEXICO



2

Source: Santos, A Primitive American Art, Willard, Houghland, 1946b.

Figure 4. Map of the Area of Northern New Mexico

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