



TIN NICHOS

Nichos are a form of religious iconography associated with traditionally Roman Catholic, Spanish-speaking countries in the Western Hemisphere. Nicho art grew out of the *retablo* tradition. *Retablos* are pine panels covered with gesso, a mixture of gypsum and animal-based glue, on which the images of popular saints are painted. *Retablos* are generally large and are sometimes combined to form altar panels. Unlike the larger *retablos*, nichos are small and built in the style of a shadow box. Many are multi-paneled with hinges so that they can fit into multiple space of different sizes. Frames are designed to highlight the religious icon in the center panel. The most popular religious images in nichos are the Virgin Mary, the saints (usually an image of the patron saint of the town or village in which the nicho is being displayed), and the Sacred Heart. Nichos tend to be highly decorated and can be made of wood, glass or tin.

Today, tin nichos are common in New Mexico, but that was not always the case. Tin is not a naturally occurring element in New Mexico. In 1821, the opening of the Santa Fe Trail coincided with the worldwide acceptance and use of British tinplate. Increasingly, more and more goods arrived in Santa Fe in tin cans. In addition, British tinplate separated loads packed in the wagons that traversed the trail. The arrival of the Acheson, Topeka and Santa Fe railroad in the 1880s brought even more goods packed in tin cans of all sizes. New Mexicans collected the opened, used containers and recycled them as folk art in the form of tin nichos. Punched tin nichos became standard home decorations as parts of altars, or as shrines for patron saints or ancestors.

Punched tin nichos were cheap and decorative. Tin is malleable and easily cut into different shapes. Patterns could be punched into the tin both quickly and easily. As a result, a new and prolific folk art emerged. According to the Spanish Colonial Arts Society of Santa Fe, "the New Mexican production of tinwork, primarily for religious purposes, is unparalleled elsewhere in the American folk arts."