



BULTOS, SANTOS AND RELIGIOUS FOLK ART IN NEW MEXICO

A rich tradition of Hispanic folk art has been a central feature of New Mexico since the early 18th century. The foundations of this phenomenon are many and complex. They include the influence of the conquest, the Counter Reformation, the century of Franciscan dominance, the Revolt of 1680, the geographic isolation of colonial New Mexico, and the appeal and resilience of the Catholic Church. Let's look at each of these briefly and chronologically.

The goals of "Gold, Glory and God" drove the conquistadors who arrived in the Western Hemisphere in the 15th and 16th centuries. While we like to concentrate on the "gold and glory" elements, here, the most influential and long-lasting was "God." As part of the *Reconquista* that had dominated the Iberian Peninsula for 700 years, conquistadors were charged with defeating the "infidel" and establishing the Roman Catholic Church. This is why every expedition into the Southwest contained not only soldiers, but also friars who were to convert the natives. Establishing the church was paramount to the Spanish crown in Europe and the colonials in New Spain.

The church that was founded in New Spain was the conservative Counter Reformation Church, which saw Protestantism as a threat and adhered to a strict interpretation of both biblical and canonical principles. This resulted in a return to and emphasis on the medieval practices that focused on the importance of iconography and the glorification of the saints. The Franciscan friars who accompanied Coronado, Oñate, de Vargas and others were imbued with this conservative approach and applied it vigorously in their conversion efforts.

Franciscan friars faced immense obstacles in their attempts to convert the pueblo peoples of the Rio Grande Valley. Confronting them were centuries-old, highly-evolved and firmly entrenched societies based on a cosmology that tied the people personally to their gods. In part, this worked to the friars' advantage. The medieval and Counter Reformation emphasis on the saints and iconography allowed the fathers to adapt the Christian saints to long-held Pueblo practices and ceremonies. While they did not attempt to modify their *santos* to represent the *kachinas* of Pueblo religion, they did attempt to demonstrate that the power of their saints was personal, and equivalent to that of the Pueblo *kachinas*. Some measure of their success can be found in the Revolt of 1680.

The Revolt of 1680 was intended to throw the Spanish out of colonial New Mexico. The principal target of that revolt was the Catholic Church as represented in the Franciscans, their missions, and their icons. Churches and images were defaced and burned. Those friars captured were tortured and killed. The principal threat to Pueblo life, the influence of the Church, was attacked and destroyed. That success lasted only ten years. When the Spanish returned a decade later, their approach was different.



Don Diego de Vargas led the *Reconquista* into New Mexico in 1690. This was a military and political reconquest. Because the greater threat at the time was from outsiders, the English and the French, less emphasis was placed upon conversion of the Pueblos. Fewer priests and friars returned. Fewer resources were allocated to conversion. More towns and villages were without a mission, a spiritual leader, or the familiar icons with which to create and continue a personal relationship with one's beliefs. As a result, local groups formed to maintain and assure the observance of religious ceremonies and practices.

Local confraternities grew in the 18th century in rural New Mexico. The 1500 miles that separated Mexico City from Santa Fe seemed much longer in the 18th and 19th centuries. *El Camino Real* was plagued with bandits and *los indios barbaros*, marauding Apaches and Comanches, who could close the road for months on end. As a result, new influences, (religious *and* artistic ideas) from the south arrived intermittently at best, and at worst, not at all. Local groups, and even those few friars and priests in New Mexico at the time, turned to local artists and carpenters to furnish the images that would carry forward the traditions of the Church and attend to the needs of the people. As the skill level of the artists at the time was rudimentary, religious leaders relied upon the medieval images brought to the area in the 17th century as models. As a result, the *santos* created in New Mexico began to differ from those of Mexico proper and the Iberian Peninsula, in particular. The influence of the Renaissance did not reach the artists and artisans of New Mexico. Instead, the traditions of medieval imagery as modified by Pueblo influences continued and evolved into a unique New Mexican folk art.

The *santeros* who created the *bultos*, *retablos*, *reredos* and *santos* were both dedicated and religious. Their efforts and creations contained not only European medieval influences, but also those adaptations to Pueblo imagery and a concentration upon local, personal connections to strongly held religious convictions. This emphasis on local folk artists and art continued until the appointment of Bishop Lamy in 1850. The Bishop took it upon himself to resurrect the church in New Mexico so that it conformed to modern, European standards. The improved modes of communication and transportation that arrived with the development of the Santa Fe Trail and the arrival of the transcontinental railroad assisted the Bishop in his efforts and the *santero* tradition had almost died out by 1900. The establishment of the Spanish Colonial Arts Society in the 1920s revived the *santero* tradition in New Mexico. Today, it thrives both as a religious and a commercial enterprise.

The existence, longevity and importance of the *Santero* tradition in New Mexico is a powerful example of the resilience of religious commitment and religious belief. For nearly 200 years, rural, Catholic communities continued their personal connections with their religion through the *santos*, *retablos*, *reredos* and *bultos* created locally to serve their needs. Unchurched, without a priest, the people of New Mexico retained their faith through their personal connections via the saints they adopted and relied upon in their daily lives. The *santeros* assisted in that process by providing the *santos* that made those personal connections possible.