



SANTOS: SHORT ESSAY

During the 18th and 19th centuries an indigenous folk art centered on missions and parish churches emerged in New Mexico. As Spanish authority reasserted itself in New Mexico in 1692, Catholic priests needed church symbols and holy images to replace those destroyed in the Revolt of 1680. However, New Mexico was the last stop in a supply line that stretched over 3,000-miles. This distance, combined with inefficient transportation, meant that supply trains sometimes took three years to reach the inhabitants of the northern-most province in Spanish North America. In addition, fewer priests were available in the provinces. Under these conditions, in remote areas, local societies formed to take care of the religious needs of their communities where priests rarely visited or were absent altogether. Both the priests and these locally-based religious groups turned to community craftsmen to fill the void in religious artifacts. Craftsmen, referred to as *santeros* because they carved *santos* (religious objects) emerged, and a rich, indigenous cultural tradition was born on the frontier.

A *santo* is a painting or sculpture of a Christian holy figure or figures. *Santos* are locally made from local materials. In the American Southwest, three kinds of *santos* emerged: *retablos*, *bultos*, and *reredos*. *Retablos* are wood panels, usually pine or aspen that are hand painted and then covered with *gesso*, a combination of powdered gypsum and animal-based glue. *Bultos* are figures carved from cottonwood root, painted using local vegetal dyes, and then covered with *gesso*. *Reredos* are altar pieces that combine several *retablos* or *retablos* and *bultos* in a multi-level architectural framework.

Church leaders adapted Catholic iconography already in use in Europe to their needs in the Americas. The European Virgin Mary became *Our Lady of Guadalupe* of the New World. San Isidore, dressed in frontier clothing, replaced the formally and aristocratically attired San Ysidro of the Iberian Peninsula. The apostle St. John the Greater (Santiago), the patron saint of horsemen, San Rafael, the patron saint of fishermen, and the Magi Kings were the Christian saints that were most fully integrated into the Pueblos of New Mexico. After 1692, local *capentieros* were tasked with making *santos* that replicated previous versions. These craftsmen were to imitate previous works, not only because they lacked artistic skills, but also because it was believed that changes would interrupt or prevent a true connection between the saint and the devotee from occurring. The better the copy of a 17th century *retablo*, *bulto*, or *reredo*, the more holy it was.

The New Mexican folk art *santo* tradition reached its peak in the mid 1850s. The first factor that led to the decline of the *santo* tradition was the appointment of Bishop Jean Baptiste Lamy as Vicar of the Diocese of Santa Fe in 1851 who set about to restore the authority of the Church. One of the methods he used was to remove the *santos*, which he felt were grotesque in form. Born, raised and educated in France, Bishop Lamy ordered that *santos* be replaced with plaster images from France that appealed more to his tastes. A revival of the *Santo* tradition began in 1925 with the founding of the Spanish Colonial



Arts Society in Santa Fe. Dedicated to the promotion and preservation of all the arts of the Spanish Colonial Era, this group actively sought out *santeros* and the *santos* they produced. In the 1930s when the Works Progress Administration conducted its *Index of American Design*, it found several *santeros* working in the smaller villages of northern New Mexico. The most famous of those was Jose Dolores Lopez from Cordova whose work inspired a revival in the late 1930s. Only recently, since the 1950s, has the *santo* tradition been recognized as a unique American folk art form. As a result, the interest in and the creation of *santos* in the Southwest has increased, and the tradition is currently experiencing a modest, modern revival that includes not only traditional, orally-trained folk *santeros*, but also artists who are neither catholic, Hispanic, nor from New Mexico.