



## STRAW MARQUETRY

In colonial and territorial New Mexico, gold was both scarce and precious. Only the very rich had access to gold and then only in limited amounts. Certainly, gold was too precious to be used for decoration. This was problematic for New Mexico's carpenters and wood carvers as their wealthier clients wished to reflect the wealth and status they had accumulated through ornate decoration and ornamentation.

Seventeenth century European artisans used a method known as "marquetry" to decorate the crosses, boxes, trunks and chests they created. The process involved using small pieces of wood, mother-of-pearl, or gold either set into shallow cavities (inlay) or applied as a thin sheet to the surface (appliqué). Wood carvers in New Mexico wanted their creations to be as attractive and ornamental as those of their European cousins. However, the cost and scarcity of gold prevented them from duplicating the process exactly. Instead, they turned to readily available local commodities as substitutes. Rather than gold, New Mexico artisans utilized cornhusks and straw.

Many artisans began with darkly painted wood. This inky background provided an excellent contrast to the light-colored husk or straw and made it appear more like real gold. Once the background had dried, thin strips or pieces of straw or cornhusks were applied in patterns and designs to the painted surface with glue. When the glue had dried, the artisan covered the entire piece with a clear lacquer in order to set the straw design in place and to give the piece a shiny, finished appearance.

Straw marquetry remained popular in New Mexico throughout the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and most of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The arrival of the railroad in the 1880s brought greater access to more inexpensive, factory-made furniture, trunks and chests. As a result, straw marquetry began to die out. A revival occurred in the 1920s with the work of Jose Dolores Lopez, and again in the 1930s when the Works Progress Administration promoted painting, handicrafts and folk art as a method to put people back to work during the Great Depression. Today straw marquetry, especially appliqué, is considered one of the finest examples of traditional Hispanic New Mexican art.