

SURVIVALS OF SPANISH CRAFTS IN NEW MEXICO

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Spanish crafts of New Mexico survive today as fragments of an earlier and more vital culture. The traditional materials, methods and motifs employed by modern craftsmen mark a trail that leads back to a cultural ecology that no longer exists. The unique combination of physical environment and psychological needs that once supported traditional Spanish crafts in New Mexico belongs to the historic past. Surviving elements of craft tradition can only suggest a portion of that rich heritage. It seems unlikely that tourist trade, professional promoters or even serious study can revive early crafts in New Mexico, or for that matter in any other part of the United States, in a manner that closely approaches their original completeness and integrity.

The Spanish crafts in New Mexico were, however, very much intact as recently as the late nineteenth century. Everyday household objects of wood and wool reflected the chronic poverty of Mexico's northern borderland after nearly three centuries of persistent Spanish settlement beginning in 1598.

Early in this long period, dreams of instant wealth gave way to settlements supported by farming and grazing. It is true, of course, that a governor might

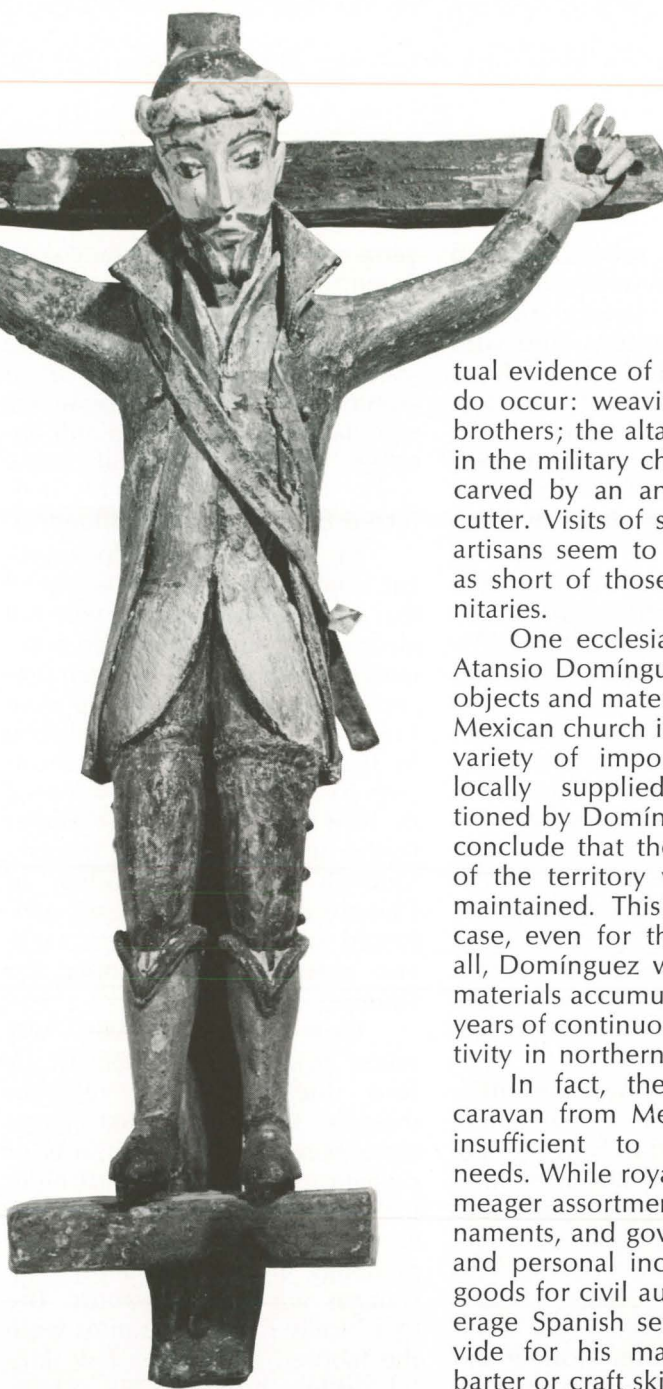


Figure of San Acacio, c. 1825.

bring a few fine pieces of furniture and fabric with him. And we know that several silver objects graced his table, as well as that of the Lord's in the mission churches of the Franciscans. But the isolation and poverty of life in colonial New Mexico offered no appeal to members of the dozens of craft guilds in central Mexico.

Infrequent references or ac-

tual evidence of skilled craftsmen do occur: weaving by the Bazin brothers; the altar screen of 1761 in the military chapel at Santa Fe carved by an anonymous stone-cutter. Visits of such professional artisans seem to have been kept as short of those of church dignitaries.

One ecclesiastic visitor, Fray Atansio Domínguez recorded the objects and materials in each New Mexican church in 1776. From the variety of imported goods and locally supplied objects mentioned by Domínguez, one might conclude that the material needs of the territory were adequately maintained. This was hardly the case, even for the Church. After all, Domínguez was reporting the materials accumulated over eighty years of continuous missionary activity in northern New Mexico.

In fact, the triennial trade caravan from Mexico was totally insufficient to meet everyday needs. While royal funds financed meager assortments of church ornaments, and government salaries and personal income brought in goods for civil authorities, the average Spanish settler had to provide for his material needs by barter or craft skills.

Considering the remarkably rich heritage of peninsular crafts — many based on refined Moorish talents and later exported to Mexico—it may seem strange that traditional Spanish skills were not more developed in New Mexico. This region, however, was distant from the center of Spanish colonial culture, and poor in the materials and needs necessary to highly organized crafts. In New Mexico, even iron ore was scarce, and therefore smithing did not

develop. On the other hand, the daily needs of the settlers for food containers were largely met by Pueblo Indian pottery. And with the exception of 6-plank chests and perhaps a tripod stool or low table, furniture was not needed in homes where Spanish-Moorish precedent required only blankets to sit on and, unrolled, to sleep in.

Textiles were among the most significant traditional crafts in New Mexico. Wool from Merino sheep stained with local and imported natural colors were worked into yarn. This was woven up on horizontal harness looms into runners that were joined in the center to form striped Rio Grande blankets. There were also checkered, twill weaves known as *jergas* and used as rugs; another textile was made up of backings carrying the so-called *colcha* stitch, apparently of local origin, which produced a tapestry-like effect.

Wood work was the other major craft tradition maintained by Spanish settlers in New Mexico. After hundreds of sun-dried mud bricks (*adobes*) were made and laid up, a craft skill in itself, wooden frames for openings and a roof of heavy beams (*vigas*) were needed to complete a modest, dirt-floor house. Mortice and tenon frames with pintle ends for hinges and bevel-edged panels set in grooves provided doors for entries and wall cupboards. By the end of the 18th century new forms included chair-height tables, standing cupboards (*trasteros*), shelves and box-sized drawers set in frames, as well as dovetailed and carved chests.

Commerce over the Santa Fe trail after 1822 brought about changes in New Mexican crafts. Textiles suffered from industry and chemistry; cheap Germantown

yarns and gaudy, synthetic colors. Some furniture even tried to take on the pretensions of style, especially Empire silhouettes. On the other hand, the abundance of commercial military containers stimulated tin work. And still another craft, ornamental straw work, remained relatively unaffected by extracultural influences.

In fairness to Anglo-American merchants, it should be noted that commercial contacts were not always harmful, and indeed commerce from the east had been preceded by goods brought up from the Chihuahua Fair, established in 1806. Wooden Mexican chests with painted scenes were adopted in New Mexico by 1825. Earlier leather trunks, some with Spanish-Moorish stitchery and others of Chinese origin, painted and reinforced with brass corners, were also used along the upper Rio Grande.

One craft, however, was raised to the level of an art by New Mexicans—their religious imagery. The region's first images were Mexican school imports or didactic sketches on animal hides painted by Franciscans beginning about 1700. All figures and panel paintings of holy or saintly personages were called *santos*. The first locally produced *santos* were the labored efforts of a few skillful settlers around 1775. *Santo*-making was not a fully developed profession; it generally occurred when farm duties lapsed in winter, and payment for work was often in kind. Nevertheless, the selection and use of woods, gesso and natural colors required careful attention and skill, and frequently produced intense expressions of high esthetic quality. As with many other traditional New Mexican crafts, the making of *santos* suffered from the great quantity of materials introduced after 1880

when the rail lines reached Albuquerque.

By the end of the next generation, traditional Spanish crafts survived largely in remote northern villages of New Mexico. The mid-1930s produced a new sort of awareness in local craft stimulated by the Work Projects Administration. The characteristics of these projects were typical of later craft revivals: research and development to produce immediate economic gains by people outside of the craft-level culture.

The craft survivals of our Spanish Southwest may serve best as modest monuments to the traditional skills of a people. The early cultural products of Spanish New Mexicans were a function of another time. There seems little question that the study and collection of these craft products as they were originally made and used are in the interest of our national heritage.

Figure of San Pedro, c. 1925.
José Dolores Lopez of Córdoba.

