

# Spanish Crafts in the American Southwest

Richard E. Ahlborn

Visitors to the southwestern states are often surprised by the Spanish or, more recently, Mexican presence. In posh neighborhoods of 1910 or 1940 vintage, houses stagger under red tile roofs and squint from iron-grilled windows. Church facades have accumulations of twisted columns, multiple cornices, and bracketed niches. Tacos are served from arcaded, stone portals, with a mission bell nearby. On the air, a brass combo slips in a little “*salza*,” or even a *paso doble*. Reality outdoes Hollywood. Some visitors revel in it; others reject it as phony. Is there a significant Spanish presence in this land, or rather, where is it?

Beneath the surface glitter of any packaged cultural object are sustaining, complex patterns of behavior and values. Promoters of cultural, preferably “folk,” arts and crafts must, if only at the outset, rely on something real, something from the past that whispers in the present. Often the light that sparkles on the surface of craft objects comes from an inner source, a sense of “group” or cultural origin. That underlying cultural identity embodies traditions of creativity within well-respected vocabularies of forms and functions. Even when changed by new materials and newer needs, the American “folk artifact” deserves a fair and full viewing.

One opportunity for viewing Spanish crafts is the October 1977 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. This year, the artisans are located within the National Museum of History and Technology, near displays of historical artifacts to which they relate. The relationship between historical artifacts and contemporary crafts is often obvious on the visual level: in size, color, material, and style. Other relationships, such as manufacture and usage, need some explanation. And so artisans were selected to demonstrate their traditional crafts.

Oscar Carvajal, a 35-year-old saddlemaker from San Antonio, Tex., maintains an ancient craft employing a series of skills. Lightweight, short-stirrup *jineta* and heavy, high-bowed, long-stirrup *estradiota* saddles, the style popular in the mid-16th century, were imported from Spain and had already appeared with Coronado in the Southwest. By the 1700s, mission Indians in Texas were making saddle trees. Then fitting and finishing of the leather and metal parts were completed by a master saddlemaker, usually of Spanish or



This retablo “*San Juan Nepomuceno*” by Rafael Aragon (1850–1860) demonstrates the simple elegance of traditional Spanish folk art.

mestizo lineage. Saddlemakers were a highly esteemed, but rough-and-tumble group. Some traveled widely, finding their work appreciated everywhere and eventually handing on their prized tools to favored apprentices. So says Mr. Carvajal, himself the offspring of a traditional Spanish–Mexican saddlemaker, Oscar Senior.

In saddlemaking, the traditional—and “proper”—way is judged best. The shape of the saddletree—with its high and angled horn slick or swelled pommel, and dished and arched cantle—has undergone centuries of modification. Likewise, the leather housing, especially carved and silvered ornamentation on show saddles, has gradually changed in size, shape, and placement. But there is little doubt that Cortéz would recognize and admire a Carvajal-crafted saddle, one still ridden by American cowboys.

Luis Eligio and Star Rodriguez Tapia of Santa Fe, N.M., brothers in their mid-20s, provide another kind of historical continuity in their furnituremaking and straw decoration. Again, the origins for such crafts were Euro–American.

In the Spanish Southwest (especially New Mexico) furniture for all but several wealthy families was almost nonexistent before 1800. In the fashion of Moorish southern Spain, most people sat, worked, ate, and slept on floors,

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protected only by a few rough textiles. Three-legged stools, six-plank chests, perhaps another of leather (*petaca*), hanging shelves (*repisa*), built-in cupboards, and low tables appeared here and there before tables, chairs, and free-standing cupboards (*trasteros*) became common. Furniture was crafted from local pines and cedar, then worked with chisel, gouge, foot-lathe, and plane. Cottonwood and aspen were later used by makers of crosses and religious images (*santos*); their works were coated with blackened pitch and “inlaid” in geometric patterns with bits of corn husk or wheat straw.

The work of the Tapias is an honest and careful revival. Luis and Star have studied collections at the Museum of New Mexico and have competed successfully in shows of traditional crafts. The combination of carefully selected, historically documented models and the use of fine craft skills and intuition produces many artifacts that are faithful not only to the Spanish heritage, but also to its future survival.

*Hispanic traditions of woodcarving are demonstrated by Luis E. Tapia, shown with a chair he made this year. He carefully researches original, historical artifacts, and often uses a well-documented piece as a model.*

(Photo by R. Ahlborn)





*During the Festival, saddlemaking and decoration in the Hispanic tradition are demonstrated in A Nation of Nations. Oscar Carvajal Jr., apprenticed to his father, became a master in five years. The Carvajal family maintains the Hispanic traditions although they have lived in San Antonio, Tex., for several generations. (Photos by R. Ahlborn)*

