The "Revival" of Image-Carving in New Mexico: Object-Fetishism or Cultural Conservation?

by Charles L. Briggs

The traditional arts have had a tough time of it during the past hundred years, as industrialization has flooded markets with mass-produced goods. Collectors have denuded the artists' communities of traditional works, thus depriving future generations of crucial prototypes. While scholars and *aficionados* have lamented the demise of traditional arts, their concern has often been expressed in efforts to induce the artists' descendants to "revive" their traditions. In order to enhance the economic feasibility of such efforts, artists are encouraged to orient their production toward well-to-do outsiders rather than their own less affluent neighbors. Since the patrons' cultural and aesthetic values contrast with those of the artists and their communities, "market forces" frequently alter the form, function and symbolic content of traditional arts along lines which seem alien to its producers.

This process is so pervasive that it often appears to be inevitable. One may rightly ask if artists, collectors, museum personnel and/or scholars can really change its course in any way. This short sketch of one tradition – image carving in northern New Mexico – will argue that the development of greater sensitivity to the nature of traditional art and the needs of the artists would go a long way toward improving the situation. My goal here is to stimulate the reader to ponder some basic issues – ethical as well as cultural and aesthetic – concerning the role outsiders have played in the evolution of traditional arts.

The Spaniards brought images of the saints as they journeyed north from Mexico to conquer, colonize and missionize the "interior provinces" after 1598. During the 17th and 18th centuries, religious medallions, oil paintings and even small statues, largely made in Mexico, were exported to the northern province of New Mexico. These religious images were executed in the dramatic European style of the baroque. Artisans, often the gray or blue-robed Franciscans, living in New Mexico began producing graphic paintings on tanned hides after 1700, and a few mildly baroque reliefs and sculptures in the round were locally made before 1800. The basic style, iconography and techniques used in these religious images sought to replicate European models.

But a very different style arose in late 18th century New Mexico. Hispanic artisans of New Mexico, utilizing mostly local materials except for some pigments, began to fill the region's need for sacred images with works of a folk style. The preceding orientation toward late Renaissance prototypes and styles was replaced by local aesthetic and iconographic selections. The result was the creation of a distinctly local, folk tradition. This Hispanic folk style flourished from about 1775 to 1850 in panel paintings *(retablos)* and persisted in sculptures *(bultos)* until the end of the 19th Century.

Anglo-American traders began coming to New Mexico after the

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1. José Dolores López with examples of his painted furniture (left and right) and carved furniture (center). From a negative in the Photographic Archive of the Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe; the original metal-mounted photograph is in the collections of the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

opening of the Santa Fe Trail in 1821. They were followed by foreign church authorities and the railroad between about 1850 and 1900. Large quantities of lithographs and plaster of paris statues flooded into the area, and the market for locally produced images virtually disappeared by the turn of the century.

History shows, however, that the art was merely dormant, not moribund. In 1868 José Dolores López was born in Córdova, a small community in the mountains of northern New Mexico, where he worked primarily as a farmer and rancher. When Córdova lost control of the surrounding grazing lands in 1915, however, the local economy fell apart, and López and his neighbors were hard-pressed to find cash income to fill the gap. López had always been a skilled furniture maker. (Two of his brightly painted chairs are shown in Plate 1.) Having begun whittling in 1917 as one means of reducing the anxiety he experienced when his eldest son was drafted into World War I, he soon began to use his newly developed chip-carving technique on his furniture. (Chip-carving, usually with curved blades, was a Spanish tradition, but the work of López featured a straight-edge chisel, producing facets rather than troughs.)

Although initially López produced works only for his neighbors and for the local chapel, he was soon "discovered" by members of the Santa Fe artists' and writers' colony visiting Córdova to witness Lenten rituals. Once López was induced to sell his works at craft fairs in Santa Fe, the Anglo patrons profoundly affected the carving of this *Hispano* in both style and subject matter. Having convinced López that bright house paints would prove too "gaudy" for Anglo-American patrons, they also persuaded him to widen his repertoire to include items, such as "Lazy Susans" and record racks, which were popular in Anglo-American homes. Exposure to German and Swiss mechanical toys resulted in López's adaptations of these forms as well (see Plate 2).

The most profound change came when Frank Applegate induced López to carve images. By the time of his death in 1937, José Dolores López had created representations of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Our Lady of Light, the Archangel Michael, St. Peter (Plate 3) and other religious personages, frequently drawing on 19th century polychromed works as prototypes. The bright colors were replaced by a complex array of chip-carved designs. In communicating his message to a non-Catholic audience, Lopez frequently cut the name of the saint (along with his own) into the surface of the image.

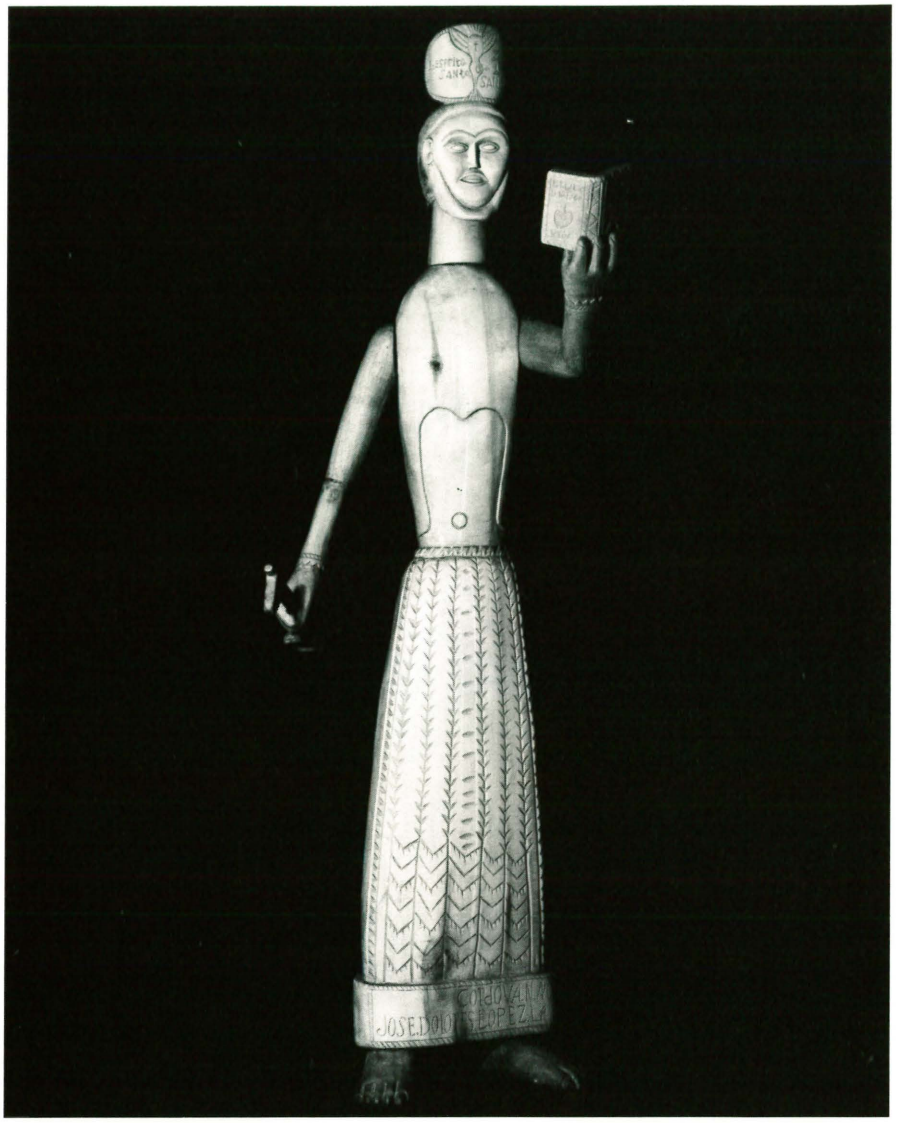
López's work had two lasting effects on his community. First, his children began carving, and now their descendants, as well as a number of unrelated families, are active carvers. López's son George, in fact, was a recent recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts' National Heritage Fellowship award, honoring his contribution to folk arts. Second, López's images have generated controversy within the Hispano community; some considered it a sin to sell sacred images to non-believers, while others felt that he was selling central religious and cultural symbols to non-Hispanos for personal profit.

What shaped the patrons' involvement in the "revival"? Their actions reflect an attitude of what may be called *object-fetishism.* When they looked at Hispano New Mexican religious arts, patrons saw the products only as objects. Accordingly they filled private and institutional collections with objects — particularly images. They were less interested in understanding and documenting the *meaning* of these objects and the reasons that people continued to venerate them. When the *aficionados* did not find artists producing the types of objects they expected, they declared the art to be dead. Therefore they encouraged

2. *The Animal Musicians* by José Dolores López (height 42.5 cm. or 17 in.). Collections of the Spanish Colonial Arts Society, Inc., Museum of International Folk Art, Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe. Photo by Charles L. Briggs

Hispanos to "revive" such arts as carving, weaving and *colcha* embroidery. Since Hispanos were seen as having lost these skills, the patrons appointed themselves as the arbiters of "Spanish colonial art," acting as judges in exhibitions and establishing craft schools to re-educate the local people in their own arts.

The problem was that the outsiders did not grasp the real nature of traditional art. Rather than merely a set of objects, the tradition of image carving involves patterns created by relationships between wood and color, design and workmanship on the one hand and between the artist and the community on the other. The nature of the art is also to



3. *St. Peter (San Pedro) with His Key and Bible* by José Dolores López (height 1.35 m. or 4.5 ft.). On loan from Eva Salazar Ahlborn to the Museum of International Folk Art, Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fé. Photograph by Charles L. Briggs.

be found in the dynamic ways in which these patterns intersect with each historical epoch. The objects themselves can be thought of as particular or partial embodiments of these patterns: their cultural and artistic value is reflected in the way they evoke the totality of cultural, aesthetic and historical patterns which shaped them.

Seen in this light, the patrons' efforts seem exceedingly naive. They tried to promote purely "traditional," "colonial," or "Spanish" works rather than the carvers' own syncretic traditions. This era found Hispano society, however, in a vastly different set of historical circumstances. With the loss of much of the groups' land base and their immersion as workers into an industrial system, the factors which shaped their art were vastly different. Consequently the patrons' efforts to induce the artists to remain within the narrow and artificial definition of "Spanish colonial style" forced the art out of its underlying pattern of historical relevance.

The patrons lamented the effects of industrialization and cultural homogenization on Hispano society. They believed that renewed production of 19th-century styles would help preserve "Spanish colonial" culture as a whole. Their encouragement did not, however, focus on promoting new means by which Hispano artists could serve the changing needs of their own communities; rather the Anglo patrons

taught the artists profit-oriented marketing strategies and ways of accommodating the newcomers' aesthetic. The most important characteristic of the image-carving art had once been its tremendous responsiveness to the cultural and aesthetic needs of Hispano Catholics, but by prompting the artists to cater to the art market patterns of the dominant society, the patrons encouraged them to undermine the fundamental premise of the art. In the end, the patrons furthered the very process of commercialization and Americanization that they decried.

This case is not cited because it is unique, for the same process has affected innumerable traditions in the United States and abroad. Our interest in "folk" or "handmade" arts and crafts moves us to buy and sell objects as a means of fostering tradition. I am not arguing that this process is entirely bad or that a few individuals could reshape it *in toto*. But the case of Córdova should indicate how collectors, dealers and scholars play a role in deciding whether the actions of patrons bring objects and historical patterns into harmony or discord.

There seem to be two ways in which we can take a positive role in this process. First, because collectors, dealers and scholars affect the way in which both artists and consumers relate to art, we must direct our efforts toward fostering patron awareness of the fact that artistic traditions comprise complex sets of cultural and aesthetic patterns. While objects embody particular intersections of these cultural and historical patterns, they are not the tradition itself. We must understand and respect the full complexity of cultural and artistic diversity, since we cannot know in advance how these patterns will be reflected at any given moment.

Second, it is the artists themselves who translate the connections between culture, artistic tradition and history into visual forms, not patrons or scholars. Our interest in fostering tradition is thus best served by supporting the artists' freedom to decide how patterns come together rather than by defining for the artist the nature of tradition or excellence. Ideally, works of art promote dialogue between individuals, communities, societies and even different historical epochs. When one party dictates the terms of the discussion, dialogue becomes monologue. The central responsibility of collectors, dealers and scholars is to try to negotiate a genuine dialogue. If this can be established, traditional artists will have a better chance of communicating the richness and complexity of their message.

Suggested Reading

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