

Preserving Traditional Culture in New Mexico

Claude Stephenson

Preserving culture. A paradoxical concept to be sure; it seems to imply that something as lively and fermentive as culture can be suspended, like the proverbial “bug in amber” for future generations to gaze upon in some glass-encased museum display. As Folk Arts Coordinator for the State of New Mexico, I prefer to think of my role as perpetuator of cultural traditions. And indeed, New Mexico’s rich cultural heritage makes my job quite pleasurable and easier than most.

This bright, arid land has been home to many cultures. The harsh, unforgiving climate and the stark yet colorful beauty of the landscape seem to bring out the spiritual and artistic in all who have chosen to settle here. From pre-historic Anasazi pottery to today’s computer-generated imagery, New Mexico has always been rich in art.

Traditional art is part and parcel of a living culture. It cannot be separated from its culture and retain its vitality and sense. Without the social and economic conditions that allowed a particular artistic form to develop and flourish, it cannot survive. Thus, preserving culture in New Mexico requires more than just photographing and recording what exists at this moment or acquiring artifacts for museum display. It requires perpetuating the conditions that allow traditional culture to flourish.

For example, to preserve weaving traditions in western and northern New Mexico, the Arts Division has assisted local cooperatives that share resources and consolidate marketing of artisans’ works. I administer apprenticeship programs that support artistic masters in passing on their traditions to dedicated apprentices within their community. The Museum of International Folk Art has long encouraged folk art through acqui-

sitions that support grass-roots artists, through sponsorship of research projects such as the New Mexico quilt survey, and through an active series of public education programs, which include workshops, demonstrations and performances by traditional artists. This museum is also the repository for all the research that my predecessor, Dana Everts, has done and that I will continue to do in documenting the traditions of today’s practicing folk artists in the state.

The Heritage Center at New Mexico State University, under the direction of Dr. Andrew Wiget, is becoming an important archive of oral histories, and is helping to document and understand the artistic traditions of southern New Mexico. The Maxwell Museum of Anthropology at the University of New Mexico has been a repository of unique Southwest traditional cultural artifacts for many years. It continues this tradition by sponsoring exhibits such as a recent one on Zuni fetish carvers by Marian Rodee, curator of Southwest Ethnology and James Ostler, Director of the Pueblo of Zuni Arts and Crafts. The John D. Robb collection at the University of New Mexico Fine Arts Library is perhaps the best collection of early New Mexican music in the world. Jack Loeffler, an ethnomusicologist from Santa Fe, and Adrián Treviño, of UNM’s Hispanic Services Center, continue Robb’s tradition today, documenting the unique music of the Southwest, which continues to exist in the face of the pervasive forces of radio and television. The Arts Division also supports artistic projects around the state that are designed to educate communities about the rich and varied traditions that exist around them. And we are participating in the Folklife Festival on the Mall to make others aware of the rich heritage that exists in the Southwest.

In our efforts to preserve cultures, we must be careful not to weaken or significantly alter the dynamics from which they developed and contin-

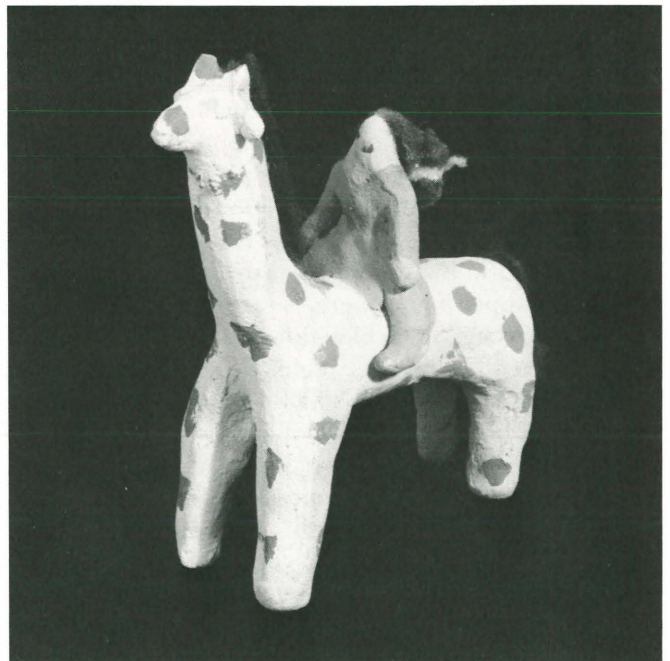
Claude Stephenson is the Folk Arts Coordinator for the State of New Mexico.



Churro sheep are herded to pasture in the Chama Valley of northern New Mexico. Community members in the Valley formed a weaving cooperative to preserve local traditions of raising sheep and weaving textiles. Photo by Terrence Moore

ue to exist. We must also be wary about casting our own cultural judgements on the validity and viability of traditional art forms. For cultural traditions are not really the same as endangered biological species; the earth's eco-system will not be altered if an art form evolves or dies. Surely some will be mourned in passing, but an art form kept alive apart from its context loses its power and beauty. An *alabado* (hymn) sung on the Mall gives a listener a glimpse into the culture from whence it sprang, but experienced in the context of a *morada* (Penitente church), the music is spiritual and moving in a way that cannot be duplicated elsewhere.

Although we regret that we cannot physically transport you to our enchanted land, it gives us great pleasure as New Mexicans to share our cultural treasures with all of you who participate in this Folklife Festival.



Once told by a Navajo trader that her mud toys "were not Navajo," Mamie Deschillie fashions her figures, like this rider with giraffe, after the clay figures made by many Navajo children, but extends the repertoire of forms. Photo by Lyle Rosbotham