

5-2017

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Tom Riedel

Regis University, Regis Library, triedel@regis.edu

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Recommended Citation

Riedel, Tom (2017) "The Regis Santos: A Teaching Collection at 50 Years," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*: Vol. 6: No. 1, Article 11.

Available at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol6/iss1/11>

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The Regis Santos: A Teaching Collection at 50 Years*

Tom Riedel

Research and Instruction Services Librarian and Curator of the Santos Collection
Regis University

Abstract

Father Thomas J. Steele, S.J. (1933-2010), a professor of English at Regis College for nearly 30 years, started the Regis Collection of New Mexico and Colorado Santos in 1966 when, as a Ph.D. candidate at the University of New Mexico, he bought his first *santo* (saint) in a secondhand store in Albuquerque. The *santo* tradition of Christian folk art flourished in New Mexico from the late 18th century through the mid-19th century, then as a revival art in the early 20th century. The tradition continues as a strong and diverse contemporary expression of faith and artistic enterprise. Fr. Steele donated his initial collection of 60 objects to the Regis Jesuit Community in 1976, and the university has continued to support acquisitions. The collection, which Fr. Steele envisioned as a “teaching collection,” has grown to nearly 1,000 objects. Following up on Fr. Steele’s book *The Regis Santos: 30 Years of Collecting*, published in 1996, this essay provides insight into Fr. Steele’s collecting, the history of *santo* production, and the work of contemporary *santeros* and *santeras* (saint makers), illustrated with examples from the collection acquired primarily in the past 20 years.



Fig. 1: Fr. Thomas J. Steele, S.J. with *Santa Bárbara* by Horacio Valdez, c. 1992 (RU0147). Photographer unknown.

In a photograph from 1992, Father Thomas J. Steele, S.J. (1933-2010), stands in profile and holds a *bulto* (carving in the round) of *Santa Bárbara* (fig. 1). Like other *santos* (saints), Saint Barbara is identified by her attributes: she wears a crown, her long dress has three flounces to honor the trinity, and she holds a palm frond. Often, she stands in front of a tower, where, according to legend, her father kept her imprisoned and ultimately killed her because of her Christian faith. He was then killed by a lightning bolt. *Santa Bárbara* provides protection from lightning and fire and, like other *santos*, is a devotional object within a tradition of New Mexican religious folk art. This *bulto* by the *santero* (saint maker) Horacio Valdez (1929-1992), who Fr. Steele declared was “probably the most highly regarded New Mexican *santero* not only as an artist, but also as a holy person,” joined the Regis collection of *santos* in 1991, twenty-five years after Fr. Steele bought his first *santo*, and just months before Valdez’s death.¹ A *bulto* Valdez made nearly a decade earlier, the *Nuestra Señora de Talpa* (Our Lady of Talpa), joined the collection just last year (fig. 2). Valdez’s fine carving, expressive faces, and striking, simple colors are signatures of his work, which has

* Photographs, unless otherwise noted, by Andrew Dorfman, Digital Initiatives and Preservation Librarian, Regis University.

influenced many contemporary santeros from the 1970s on.

In *The Regis Santos: Thirty Years of Collecting*, published in 1996, Fr. Steele told how he discovered and bought his first santo — actually a small, Mexican oil painting — at a secondhand store in Albuquerque when he was on the hunt for something else. This initial purchase sparked his interest in the religious folk art he came to revere, study, and collect. He bought, traded, and bartered for santos until he assessed that the 60 objects he had obtained had a market value that surpassed his comfort level with his vow of poverty as a Jesuit priest. In 1976, he donated the collection to the Regis Jesuit Community, which recognized and supported it as a unique and appropriate asset for a Jesuit institution. In subsequent years, Regis College and Regis University have continued to support it; the collection of 300 objects that Fr. Steele wrote about 20 years ago has more than tripled in size, standing now at close to 1,000.²



Fig. 2: *Nuestra Señora de Talpa*, Horacio Valdez, 1982 (RU0972)

The teaching collection

Fr. Steele emphasized that the Regis collection was a “teaching collection” that concerned itself more with the sociology of religion than with compiling a group of museum-quality pieces: “Regis University does indeed collect, preserve, and interpret santos, but it places a relatively low priority on collection and preservation and such a high priority on interpretation that the adjective ‘teaching’ is the central part of the collection’s central purpose.”³

Fr. Steele’s early goal as a collector was to find examples of the Catholic saints most commonly portrayed in 18th and 19th-century Hispanic New Mexico; in fact, one of his first scholarly pursuits related to santos was to inventory the frequency of particular saints’ representation in New Mexican santo art, as well to catalog their individual attributes and iconography. While collecting individual saints, he also sought to expand the examples of works by the various identified santeros who had made them.

In 1974, Fr. Steele published *Santos and Saints: Essays and Handbook*, which was released in two subsequent editions as *Santos and Saints: The Religious Folk Art of Hispanic New Mexico*.⁴ *Santos and Saints* is among a handful of important, seminal works of santo scholarship, and it is even widely used as a handbook and guide by contemporary santeros and santeras, who consult it to confirm iconographical details for individual saints or to identify less represented saints to add to their repertoires.⁵

The golden age

Colonial santeros worked in a distinctive style that found full expression from the late 18th to the mid-19th century, and the period from 1790 to 1860 is generally considered the “golden age” or classical period of Spanish Colonial art in New Mexico. Colonial santeros used materials at hand in New Mexico and southern Colorado — pine, aspen, cottonwood root, and pigments derived from plants and minerals — to create devotional bultos and *retablos* (paintings on wood panel). Santos were venerated in churches, home chapels, and *moradas* (meeting houses) of *Los Hermanos de la Fraternidad Piadosa de Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno*

(The Pious Brotherhood of Our Father Jesus the Nazarene), commonly known as the *Penitentes*.

The faithful could readily identify the individual saints according to their attributes, and each saint had specific devotional properties. Just as Santa Bárbara might protect from lightning strikes, *San Antonio de Padua* (Saint Anthony of Padua) might help locate lost objects.

Traditional santos are recognizable as individual saints, and traditional style is characterized by key elements of production and execution.⁶ For example, saints in retablos inhabit ambiguous spaces. Even though the sheep and botanical elements of *La Divina Pastora* (Divine Shepherdess) by the Arroyo Hondo Painter (fig. 3) suggest an outdoor space, it's not easy to make sense of this scene as a "landscape" since it is framed by drapery and a decorative border. But even though a curtain is theatrically draped across the top and sides, it does not quite look like a stage setting, either. Mary's figure is outlined, her solidity established by an opaque red robe and blue cloak. Only the contours of the sheep are drawn against the background, making them appear almost transparent. Indeed, the corporeality of the one across Mary's shoulders is difficult to parse as it crosses behind her halo and the solid, upturned collar of her robe. Only the sheep in the lower left seems to have any substance at all as its rump breaks through the framing border stripes.

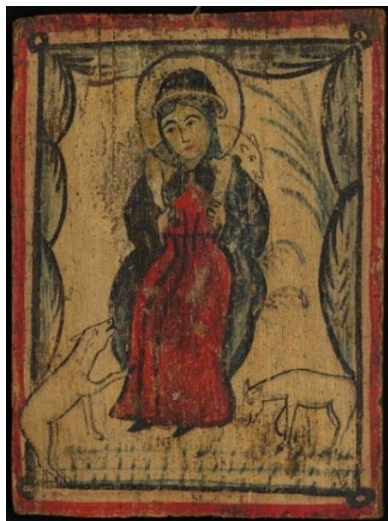


Fig. 3: *La Divina Pastora*, Arroyo Hondo Painter or Follower, c. 1820 (RU0802)



Fig. 4: *La Divina Pastora*, José Paez, c. 1785 (RU0782)

In contrast, the painting of *La Divina Pastora* by the Mexican artist José Paez (fig. 4) presents a three-dimensional space where sheep at the hem of Mary's robe establish the foreground, hovering *putti* the middle ground, and a mountainous landscape the background. Mary, sheep, and *putti* are all fully realized as figures that could have been rendered from observation, their mass established by the highlighting and shading of the oil paint. Small paintings such as this one, along with mass-produced prints, such as the engraving of *Saints Abraham and Mary* by Marten De Vos (fig. 5), made their way from Mexico and served as references for *santeros* who worked further north.

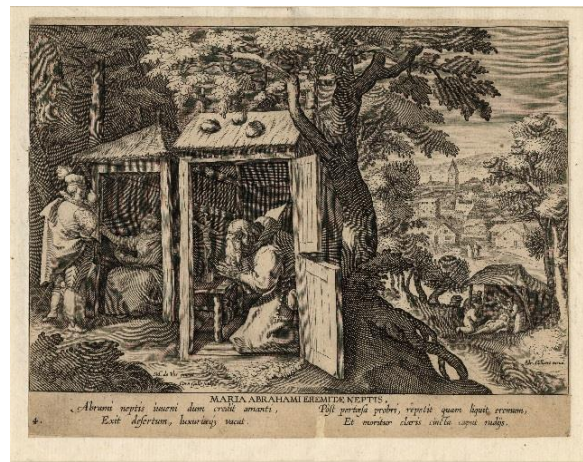


Fig. 5: *Saints Abraham and Mary*, Marten De Vos, c. 1600 (RU0305)

Judge Mescall's gift

While Fr. Steele systematically collected saints and saint-makers from New Mexico and southern Colorado, the scope of the collection was considerably broadened by a significant gift of 135 objects from Judge Thomas J. Mescall of Albuquerque. Donated in 1999, many of the works originated in Mexico, Central America, the Philippines, and Western Europe, and they now play an educational role in situating Christian art of the American Southwest within the context of the greater Spanish Empire. Fr. Steele identified the Mexican and Guatemalan pieces from the gift as “the sort of provincial pieces that served as sources and models for the New Mexican tradition because they were comprehensible to the village artist of the far northern frontier.”⁷⁷ For example, objects such as the early 19th century Mexican *San Miguel Arcángel* (Saint Michael the Arcangel) and Guatemalan *San Antonio de Padua* (figs. 6 and 7) would have been easily identified by contemporaries in New Mexico, although both are carved in a more naturalistic, academic style than would have been common there, and use exotic materials such as gold paint. Just as in New Mexico, the San Miguel holds scales and a sword, even though he doesn't stand on a characteristic, vanquished snake-like monster. For his part, San Antonio is clean-shaven and tonsured and wears the blue robe and knotted cord of the Franciscans. A seated Christ child, right hand raised in benediction, balances on a Bible that Antonio holds in his left hand. While the static expression of the figure of San Antonio doesn't match the dynamism of the active stance of San Miguel, the Guatemalan artist still convincingly drapes San Antonio's robe over the figure's right foot, and the Niño's robe falls between his knees in a representation of observed reality.



Fig. 6: *San Miguel Arcángel*, Mexican, early 19th cen. (RU0466). Gift of Thomas J. Mescall.



Fig. 7: *San Antonio de Padua*, Guatemalan, late 19th cen. (RU0478). Gift of Thomas J. Mescall.

Identifying the saint-makers

Just as these two bultos have no signatures or credits that identify their makers, neither do most New Mexican santos. Even church records did not always name the artisans responsible for altarpieces and other devotional objects, challenging scholars, beginning in the 1930s, to categorize and identify them. Retablos and bultos whose authorship could not be established were grouped according to their geographic locations or stylistic characteristics. The Laguna Santero, for example, named for the significant altarpiece by his hand that dates from 1790 at the New Mexican mission church of San José at Laguna Pueblo, is one of the earliest santeros whose work exemplifies characteristics of the golden age style. Indeed, according to Charles M. Carrillo and Fr. Steele, this important but unnamed santero likely ran a workshop, or *taller*, that produced retablos, gesso relief panels, bultos, and other objects.⁸ The *Nuestra Señora de los Dolores* (Our Lady of Sorrows, fig. 8), acquired by Regis in 2008, exhibits the long-fingered hands with crooked thumbs, tilted head, and distinctive eye shape — straight upper eyelids and rounded lower eyelids — that characterize his work.⁹ The retablo of Mary, with her breast pierced by seven swords to represent her sorrow after the crucifixion of Christ, floats in an unidentifiable space just as the *Santa Rosalia* (Saint Rosalia, fig. 9) by Antonio Molleno does. Molleno, whose identity continues to be questioned by scholars, likely worked as an apprentice or follower of the Laguna Santero, but this polygonal retablo represents the “middle period” of his work: the figure is closely contained within a calligraphic oval, and characteristic but unidentifiable red shapes — which initially led to him being called “The Chili Painter” — press in on the figure from the lower sides.¹⁰



Fig. 8: *Nuestra Señora de los Dolores*, The Laguna Santero, c. 1790 (RU0827)



Fig. 9: *Santa Rosalia*, Antonio Molleno, c. 1830 (RU0800)

A santero known for many years as the Santo Niño Santero created delicate and sweet depictions of the *Santo Niño* (Holy Child) in his various guises, and in both retablo and bulto form. It was only in 2002 that the artist was conclusively confirmed as José Manuel Benavides.¹¹ The *Santo Niño de Praga* (Holy Child of Prague, fig. 10)

typically wears a crown and holds a scepter in addition to the globe with a cross on top seen in this example, a gift at Christmas 1998 to Fr. Steele from Santa Fe art dealers and friends Nat and Page Owings. The artist's attention here is given to the fine carving of the face and hands, while the body remains largely cylindrical, the stylized drapery of the robe created by furrows that fall straight and simply to the base.



Fig. 10: *Santo Niño de Praga*, José Manuel Benavides, c. 1845 (RU0404). Gift of Nat and Page Owings.



Fig. 11: *San José Patriarca*, Rio Abajo Style Group, c. 1780-1820 (RU0735)



Fig. 12: *San José Patriarca*, Rio Abajo Style Group, c. 1780-1820 (RU0412)

Two figures of *San José Patriarca* (Saint Joseph the Patriarch), both attributed to the Rio Abajo Style Group and clearly by the hand of two different artists, are representative of the scope of the task to identify santeros that persists today (figs. 11

and 12). The Rio Abajo (lower river) group of santeros was active at the time of the golden age in the north, but in Albuquerque, El Paso, and as far south as Chihuahua. The group includes a number of artists, as yet unidentified, who likely worked together in workshop settings.¹² They made santos in a more naturalistic style than those that were produced in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado and often, although not in these two examples, drapery was made of canvas soaked in gesso, and feet were built up with plaster. St. Joseph typically holds a seated Christ child in one hand or perched on a forearm; in figure 12, the child is standing, and in figure 11, he is missing altogether — although the figure's extended left hand has a hole in it, a means to attach the missing child via a peg in his bottom.

The implications of collecting

One of the obvious charges of the teaching collection is to understand how santos were produced as physical objects, as well as their subsequent life as devotional objects, but what does it mean about them — and us — that they are now objects in a collection? This *Jesús Nazareno* (Jesus the Nazarene, fig. 13) was made by José Benito Ortega (1858-1941), a santero whose prolific body of work includes a standard variety of saints as well as many passion figures such as this one. Ortega was active from 1875-1907, during a period characterized in New Mexico by a marked decline in the production of handcrafted items generally, as santos, but also furniture, weaving, and ironwork lost popularity to mass-produced goods brought into New Mexico over the Santa Fe Trail and by train. Even so, hand-carved and bloody passion figures were still in great demand for devotion by the Penitente Brotherhood, and Ortega, like many santeros an Hermano himself, made many of them for moradas across northeastern New Mexico.

Penitent lay brotherhoods developed in the small, isolated villages of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Since priests rarely visited these outposts, the Brotherhood took responsibility for religious observances during Lent and Holy Week, conducting rituals at times of death, and helping their communities throughout the year. The Brotherhood's penitential practices, which

included self-flagellation, received much attention from outsiders. In the first half of the 20th century, Penitente rituals were even marketed to tourists in New Mexico as a local curiosity in spite of the Brotherhood's desire for privacy.¹³

Carved images of Christ as Jesus the Nazarene were sometimes life-sized, and they had arms hinged at the shoulders, and leather or fabric articulated elbows that allowed them to be manipulated; hands could be bound in front of the figure in processions that re-created the Stations of the Cross, or pivoted outward to represent crucifixion.



Fig. 13: *Jesús Nazareno*, José Benito Ortega, c. 1890 (RU0877)

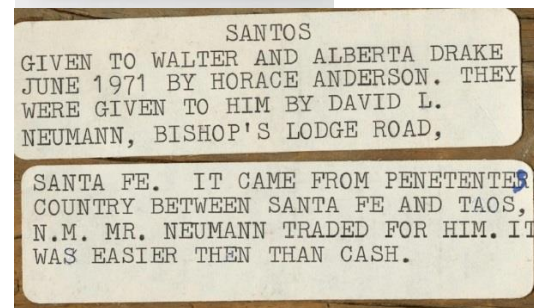


Fig. 14: *Jesús Nazareno*, labels on bottom of base

The Ortega *Jesús Nazareno* spent the first part of its life as a devotional object, according to a typed label on its base, somewhere in “Penitentes country between Santa Fe and Taos” (fig.14). It’s unusual and welcome to have so much information about a piece’s provenance attached directly to it, as any collector wants to know not only the history of the work’s creation, but of its ownership. Still, the information presented here also raises a number of questions: was it purchased from an individual, or, more likely, from a *morada* (fig. 15)? When was “then?” *Moradas* typically held onto their passion figures at least into the 1940s, even though popular

representations of saints were avidly collected in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁴ What exactly was traded for this figure that was “easier then than cash?” Walter Drake, a wealthy businessman from Colorado Springs, had an eponymous mail order business, and David L. Neumann was a well-known dealer of Southwestern Indian jewelry in Santa Fe. Who was the go-between Horace Anderson? Knowing the answers to these questions and others would help reveal how the figure embodies not only the reverence for which it was created, but the cultural, religious, and economic dynamics at play at the times it has changed ownership.



Fig. 15: *Morada* objects display, Thomas J. Steele, S.J. Santo Gallery. Photo by Sean Gruno.

The revival

In the early decades of the 20th century, Anglo interest in collecting santos as regional folk art preceded efforts to increase understanding of and respect for the art's cultural context. Writer Mary Austin and artist Frank Applegate, transplanted to Santa Fe from Illinois and California in 1918 and 1921 respectively, set out to revive New Mexican Hispanic culture by establishing the Society for the Revival of Spanish Colonial Arts, incorporated as the Spanish Colonial Arts Society in 1929.¹⁵ Their intention was to preserve historic Hispanic material culture while encouraging contemporary production of Spanish Colonial arts as a means to improve the economic status of the Hispano population. The Society organized the Santa Fe Fiesta and, beginning in 1926, the Spanish Market, offering prizes in categories such as blanket weaving, handmade furniture, figure carving, tin work, ironwork, colcha embroidery, and crochet. Artisans were also provided venues to sell their work at the Spanish Arts Shop in Santa Fe's Sena Plaza from 1930-1933 and the Native Market on Palace Avenue from 1934-1940.

While Hispanos were being encouraged and directed to make santos and other handcrafted goods to sell, Applegate and artists Andrew Dasburg and B.J.O. Nordfeldt, among others, were accumulating their own personal collections of classic santos. Applegate became a dealer of Spanish Colonial art when he established the Spanish & Indian Trading Company in 1924; by 1925, he estimated that his personal collection of bultos, retablos, and other Spanish Colonial objects numbered close to 200.¹⁶ As Anne Evans, founder of the Denver Art Museum, noted in 1925, santo collecting had become a serious business, with museums and dealers "bidding against each other for every treasure they [could] lay hands on."¹⁷



Fig. 16: *San Cristóbal*, Frank Applegate, 1928 (RU0181)

In addition to collecting and trading santos, Applegate made them himself. In the *San Cristóbal* (Saint Christopher) retablo (fig. 16), the figures of Saint Christopher and the Christ child are rendered in traditional linear outline, clothing is patterned rather than naturalistic, and the river across which Christopher carries the Niño is suggested by a wash of green paint across the bottom third of the panel. A typewritten note is affixed to the back: "Presented by Frank Applegate to Mary Austin on her 60th birthday, 1928," a testament to their personal connection through Spanish Colonial arts. Applegate's *San Rafael* (fig. 17) is likewise based on traditional works. Painted in muted browns and yellows, the volumes of the figure's head, arms, tunic, pants, and boots are simply managed with minimal detail carved into the face and hands. Fr. Steele noted that whatever one might think of Applegate's work as a santero, his carving was "a version and not at all a slavish copy" of earlier New Mexican santos.¹⁸



Fig. 17: *San Rafael Arcángel*, Frank Applegate, c. 1930 (RU0367). Gift of Dorothea and Sarah Frantz.

Although Applegate collected authentic santos and made his own in a traditional style, he encouraged carver José Dolores López (1868-1937) of Córdova, New Mexico, to chip-carve them and leave them unpainted to increase their appeal to the largely Anglo tourist market. López's signature chip-carving style has been passed down through his family as seen in the *San Rafael* by his son George T. Lopez (1900-1993, fig. 18). Alice Reich, a Regis College Professor Emerita, purchased this San Rafael on a trip with Fr. Steele and Regis undergraduate students to New Mexico in the early 1970s, and she donated it to the collection in Fr. Steele's memory in 2014. San Rafael is identifiable by the fish he carries, but this version has him holding a bird in his other hand rather than the traditional staff and gourd, as in the example by Applegate. Revival style carvings of saints that include animals, such as Rafael and *San Francisco de Asís* (Saint Francis of Assisi) — usually portrayed in the company of birds, squirrels, and other small animals rather than with the traditional skull and cross — have been popular purchases by tourists to Santa Fe since the 1920s.



Fig. 18: *San Rafael Arcángel*, George T. Lopez, c. 1975 (RU0892). Gift of Alice Reich in memory of Fr. Tom Steele.

The Federal Art Project in New Mexico

It wasn't until the 1930s and 1940s that scholars started to unravel the mysteries of santos and their makers. In a series of three articles published in *New Mexico Magazine* in 1935, New Mexican historian and santo collector Gilberto Espinosa described not only the materials and process of making bultos and retablos, but the role santos played in the spiritual lives of Hispanos in New Mexico.¹⁹ Around the same time, anthropologist, librarian, and artist E. Boyd started recording and cataloging individual santos for *The Portfolio of Spanish Colonial Design in New Mexico*, a project commissioned by the state's office of the Federal Art Project (FAP). The FAP was one of the many programs of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration. Boyd made watercolor illustrations of material culture from across the state, including many of the santos from chapels, churches, and private collections. Six engravers then carved the outlines of Boyd's images into wood blocks to pull prints such as this *San José Patriarca* (Saint Joseph the Patriarch, fig. 19). Prints were then hand-colored by one of the 44 artists hired to produce the raw material for 500 portfolios in 1938.



Fig. 19: *San José Patriarca*, artist's print, Portfolio of Spanish Colonial Design in New Mexico, 1938 (RU0539-9)

FAP artists in New Mexico were also directed to reproduce objects in three-dimensional form. Vernon Hunter, the state director of the Project, gave Eliseo Rodriguez (1915-2009), one of the listed Portfolio artists, some colonial examples of straw inlay (known as “poor man’s gold” for its reflective qualities) with encouragement to figure out how to recreate it. Paula Rodriguez (1915-2008), Eliseo’s wife, learned straw inlay technique by experimenting alongside him in the 1930s. In this example (fig. 20), one of 61 objects generously donated to the Regis collection by Janice Kugel in 2015, Rodriguez sectioned the cross into representations of eight saints, each easily recognizable even in miniature.²⁰



Fig. 20: *Cruz*, Paula Rodriguez, 1996 (RU0916). Gift of Janice Kugel.

Juan A. Sanchez (1901-1969), another of the artists who hand colored plates for the Portfolio, was also one of a few woodcarvers encouraged by state FAP director Vernon Hunter to make exact copies of santos from the chapels and moradas of northeastern New Mexico to display in Community Art Centers established by the Project.²¹ Sanchez embraced his assignment, and stated his appreciation for the originals not only as art works, but because they were “rich in tradition, history and culture” and had “much to do with the daily toils and pleasures of the early settlers.”²² Sanchez had been hired by Hunter through the Native Market, established by Santa Fean Leonora Curtin, where Sanchez sold carved buttons and small carvings of animals. Sanchez made this *Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción* (Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, fig. 21) in 1937, while he was employed by the FAP. Our Lady is frontal and symmetrical, and the gessoed canvas that forms her robe and cape is decorated in motifs based on 19th century designs. Sanchez developed his own style based on the colonial masters he copied, and continued to make santos, as well as carved animals and furniture, that he sold in galleries in Santa Fe and Taos, and at Ortega’s Weaving Shop in Chimayó into the 1960s.



Fig. 21: *Nuestra Señora de Purísima Concepción*, Juan A. Sanchez, 1937 (RU0545). Gift of Dolores Martínez.

While Sanchez's charge for the FAP was rooted in traditional santo production, woodcarver Patrocinio Barela carved unique and modern-looking figures that often reflected religious themes. Barela received national acclaim for his originality; in 1936, when eight of his works were exhibited at the national show of FAP work titled "New Horizons in American Art" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, *Time* magazine declared him "the Discovery of the Year."²³ Barela organically sculpted individual pieces of wood. For example, *El Buen Pastor* (The Good Shepherd, fig. 22), a carving that predates Barela's years

working for the FAP, carefully positions a knot in the wood as the Good Shepherd's navel. As Barela said, "The idea depends on the piece [of wood]. When I get the piece I decide what I can do."²⁴



Fig. 22: *El Buen Pastor*, Patrocinio Barela, c. 1931-34 (RU0168)

Even though Barela's work was not painted, its dynamism showed less affinity with the similarly unpainted figures of the López family than Juan Sanchez's formal, frontal pieces did. Still, unpainted bultos became recognized as a new category of tradition at the Spanish Market in the first half of the 20th century.



Fig. 23: Contemporary santeros and santeras display, Thomas J. Steele, S.J. Santo Gallery

A contemporary shift in tradition

As the Spanish Colonial Arts Society's definition of what constituted tradition in the first quarter of the 20th century expanded to include unpainted bultos and relief panels, in the last quarter of the century santeros and santeras began to investigate new methods, materials, and interpretations of iconography. Horacio Valdez's work, for example, shows traditional character in its frontality and its stasis, but achieves it using materials that were considered non-traditional and even controversial in the 1970s (figs. 1 and 2). Valdez started carving by making copies of the santos in his morada in 1974 while recovering from a serious workplace accident that had crushed his right hand and nearly killed him. Lacking guidance from traditional santeros, he relied on the advice of an art supply store clerk to use the acrylic paint, rather than traditional natural pigments, that he would use throughout his life.²⁵ *La Conquistadora* (Our Lady of the Conquest, fig. 24) shows Valdez at the peak of his powers as an artist. The overall columnar profile of the figure makes it seem

deceptively simple, but if it were not carved in perfect symmetry, any variance would demand attention.



Fig. 24: *La Conquistadora*, Horacio Valdez, 1989 (RU0971)

The *Santo Niño de Atocha* (Holy Child of Atocha, fig. 25) by Denver santero Carlos Santistevan, a frequent winner in the unpainted bulto category at Spanish Market, uses aspen and cedar to establish hue in an unpainted piece. The carving adheres to traditional iconography: the seated child wears pilgrim's garb and a broad-brimmed hat, and holds a staff with a gourd in one hand and a basket in the other. But, typical of much of his work, Santistevan added a twist to the interpretation. The legendary Holy Child provided food to Christian prisoners held captive by the Moors, and in this version, the drapery of the child's robe morphs into bars behind which those carved prisoners can be seen (fig. 26).



Fig. 25: *Santo Niño de Atocha*, Carlos Santistevan, 2010 (RU0852)



Fig. 26: *Santo Niño de Atocha*, detail

For many years, Carlos Santistevan was a close friend and advisor to Fr. Steele, who referred to Santistevan nearly 20 years ago as the “Dean of Denver Santeros,” and noted his importance as the founder and master of a Colorado style of saint-making based in New Mexican tradition. In fact, Santistevan’s family is descended from the “Truchas Master,” Pedro Antonio Fresquís (1749-1831), who was among the first New Mexico-born santeros. The *Santo Niño de Atocha* bulto was displayed at the quadrennial santo show at the O’Sullivan Gallery on the northwest campus of Regis University when Fr. Steele passed away in 2010; it was the first santo added to the collection in his memory.

Santo-making continues to be a meaningful and viable pursuit among contemporary painters and carvers in New Mexico and Colorado. Works by new santeras and santeros, as well as by more established contemporary artists, continue to be added to the collection. Federico Prudencio brought many years of skill and artistry as a furniture maker to his vocation as a santero, a transition he made under the tutelage of Alcario Otero (fig. 27). (Otero is notable not only as an accomplished artist, but for the two *San Ignacio de Loyola* (Saint Ignatius of Loyola) bultos he made for the Regis collection; the first one was given as a gift to Pope John Paul II when he met President William Clinton on the Regis campus in 1993, and the second one was made to replace it. Otero’s mentor, Charles M. “Charlie” Carrillo, had likewise made a retablo of San Ignacio that was taken from the collection to give to President Clinton, and then made a second one that has a permanent home at Regis.)



Fig. 27: *Nuestra Señora del Rosario*, Federico Prudencio, 2013 (RU0886)

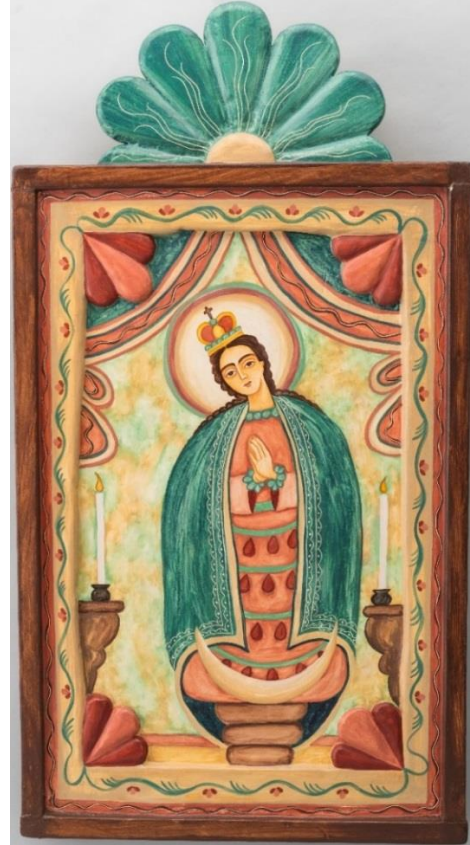


Fig. 28: *Our Lady of the Lakes*, Teresa Duran, 2014 (RU0900)

The skirt shape of Prudencio's *Nuestra Señora del Rosario* (Our Lady of the Rosary) mimics carved images of Mary that would have had hoop skirts made from gessoed canvas stretched over lath, but Prudencio's is intricately carved wood, down to the decorative white beadwork and baubles. Turquoise and rose anchor the color palette in this work as they do in the *Our Lady of the Lakes* (*Nuestra Señora de San Juan de los Lagos*, fig. 28), a retablo by Coloradan Teresa Duran. Duran carved out a framed, inset surface on which to paint the central image from a large, thick slab of pine. A native of southern Colorado, Duran remembers first being moved by santos when she visited a morada on a farm that her father bought when she was twelve — and also a little spooked as the unstable floor of the room animated the figures as she walked past them.



Fig. 29: *Nuestra Señora de la Piedad*, Frank Zamora, 2010 (RU0855)

A *Nuestra Señora de la Piedad* (Our Lady of Piety; Pietà, fig. 29) by Francisco “Frank” Zamora shows iconographic continuity with traditional New Mexican santos but integrates an elaborate, colorful, scrollwork frame. The Christ figure is bloodied, a sword pierces the grieving Mary’s breast, and God the Father and the Holy Spirit float in the upper reaches of the frame. Zamora paints with natural pigments, and the piece is sealed with piñon sap. In a contemporary twist, decals of angels and putti occupy the four inner corners of the frame. Zamora has an art degree from *El Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes* in Mexico City, and worked for nearly 20 years as a contemporary artist before he started making santos, in part because of his re-association with Carlos Santistevan in the mid-2000s.



Fig. 30: *San Ignacio de Loyola*, Gustavo Victor Goler, 2013 (RU0877)

Gustavo Victor Goler, who conserved and restored New Mexican and Latin American santos in his family’s art conservation studio in Santa Fe before he started making them himself, also uses traditional materials. (See fig. 8 for Goler’s frame restoration.) But his carving style shares more characteristics with Mexican carving of the 19th century (fig. 6, for example) — dynamic stance, figural realism — than with the less naturalistic forms of 19th-century New Mexico. Goler has also veered significantly from traditional iconography in the portrayal of *San Ignacio de Loyola* (Saint Ignatius of Loyola, fig. 30). Even though the figure is identified as Ignatius by the book he holds open to the words *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam* (To the Greater Glory of God), he is typically portrayed in santos as a Jesuit priest. This representation, commissioned in memory of Fr. Steele, shows him as a Basque soldier. Wounded in battle, Ignacio became very devout during his convalescence, prepared for the priesthood, and founded the Society of Jesus (the Jesuit brotherhood) based on his Spiritual Exercises, a program of prayer.

While traditional materials and subjects are mandated for many prize categories at Spanish Market, a category for “Innovations within Tradition” has been established by the Spanish

Colonial Arts Society to allow artists to “‘push the envelope’ of the artistic traditions and iconography inherent to the cultural heritage of New Mexico” and “to create and sell hand-made works of art that remain grounded in the artistic expressions of the past, yet are updated and reinterpreted for modern sensibilities.”²⁶ Charles M. Carrillo’s *José’s Real Estate* (fig. 31) falls into this category, playing on the notion that burying a statue of Saint Joseph in the front yard of a house will expedite its sale. Flowers sprouting from the car’s radiator pay sly reference to Joseph’s typical attribute of a flowering staff, and the upside-down sign suggests the prescribed orientation of the figure’s burial.



Fig. 31: *José’s Real Estate*, Charles M. Carrillo, 2007 (RU0831)

Innovation in modern santo production isn’t limited to retablos and bultos. Contemporary straw inlay crosses now often make use of dyed straw to expand the color palette, as in this example by Martha Varoz Ewing (fig. 32). The cross shape has long been embraced by santeros for its strong symbolism as well as its design possibilities; here, Ewing builds an organic, cruciform sheaf of wheat out of carefully shaped bits of straw, and frames the organic design with a border of three nesting outlines — the inner two dyed green — and with tri-lobed forms marking each ninety-degree angle.



Fig. 32: *Cruz*, Martha Varoz Ewing, 2014 (RU0894)

While repetitions of threes in Ewing’s cross reference the trinity, Jimmy Trujillo applies a different numeric scheme to *Mis Amigos* (My Friends, fig. 33). He divides the cross bars into 11 sections that represent Christ’s apostles (minus Judas) with a star representing Christ at the crossing and the dove of the Holy Spirit at the top. Trujillo’s method of encrusting straw fixes pieces of it directly into pine sap, until the work is sealed with thinner layers of pine sap varnish to create a rich, lacquered finish. The shape of the found wood of Trujillo’s cross mimics representations of the Crucifixion that show Christ’s knees jutting to the left or right, such as the one by Colorado santero Jay Seale, which also features a characteristic pouf seen in many classic bultos and retablos, extending from the right of Christ’s loincloth (fig. 34).



Fig. 33: *Mis Amigos*, Jimmy Trujillo, 2012 (RU0875)



Fig. 34: *Crucifijo*, Jay Seale, c. 1998 (RU0387)

Fr. Steele supported contemporary santeras and santeros by acquiring representative bultos, retablos, prints, drawings, tinwork, and mixed-media works that characterize santo production in the 20th and 21st centuries. In *The Regis Santos: 30 Years of Collecting*, he noted the pleasure of “adding santeros” to the collection, whether he was filling a gap from earlier centuries or discovering new talent. Some of the “new” santeras and santeros added to the collection in recent years include Lynn Fresquez, Brigida Montes, Miguel Strunk, Sean Trujillo, Kevin Burgess de Chávez, Federico Prudencio, Lena Blea, Vanessa Fresquez, Frank

Garcia, Marie Sena, Patricio Chávez, and Lawrence Córdova.

Cataloging the collection

As he collected, Fr. Steele compiled a catalog, *The Regis University Collection of New Mexico and Colorado Santos*, which recorded all he knew about each object: its artist, date, subject, iconography, acquisition, provenance, measurements, conservation history, and anything else he thought worth noting. Since the catalog is organized sequentially by acquisition number, beginning with RU0001, anyone browsing through can see how the collection has grown object by object over time. The catalog is important, too, in what it reveals about Fr. Steele’s character, opinions, and wit. In the catalog, he is candid about his attempts at restoration and conservation, and sometimes expresses regret: “If I had it to do over, I’d only finish cleaning what was stripped and leave the rest of the Guadalupe where it was — as a teaching device.” Although he had great respect for all objects he believed had been made as a genuine expression of faith, he might still offer a stinging critique of their execution. In response to a crudely carved Our Lady he picked up at an Albuquerque flea market in 1990 he said “UGGGHly — Nuestra Señora del Frankenstein” and listed the artist as “wisely anonymous.” He also sometimes added political commentary; of one of his own efforts as a santero, a woodcut print of Doña Sebastiana (Lady Sebastian) from 1976, he said “I did it during the Death-wish Republican convention.”²⁷

Although the catalog is invaluable for its detailed records, it has also required frequent, manual updating over the years — including maintaining a subject index — and it has no accompanying images.²⁸ As the collection has grown with purchases and donations, it has also outgrown the capacity and reach of the print catalog. To that end, for the past several years, the objects in the collection have been systematically photographed, from multiple sides when warranted, and records based on Fr. Steele’s catalog have been entered into a [searchable online database](#). To date, over two thirds of the 984 objects have been photographed, and over half have been electronically cataloged. The database enables researchers, saint-makers, students, and others

interested in santos to browse images and view corresponding catalog information, and to search by keyword for artists, subjects, identifying attributes, media, donors, or any other relevant criteria. More importantly, it makes available for study the many objects that typically have not been displayed in exhibits for a number of reasons.

Fr. Steele did not specify exactly how he expected the santo collection to be used in teaching other than suggesting that it could — and should — be approached from multiple disciplines. In fact the collection has been used for study in art, English, history, Spanish, and religious studies classes. A New Mexico Santo Tradition class in Regis College studies santos and culminates in students selecting a particular saint, making a retablo, and curating a virtual exhibit. The collection is also open to study for community members and small groups. The Thomas J. Steele, S.J. Santo Gallery


(fig. 35), located on the third floor of Dayton Memorial Library on the Regis northwest campus, is open to the public whenever the library is open. The gallery is based on Fr. Steele's desire to display santos in a way that viewers can interact with them psychologically in a shared space. In 2013, the gallery was renovated and exhibits reinstalled, keeping his vision in mind: "it resembles a family altar, a *morada oratorio*, a village chapel that's not controlled by the pastor of the town church, with santos of various sorts crowded together on the wall and on the table-top. I try to group the Regis santos in such a manner that they seem to form a community among themselves."²⁹ More than 50 years after Fr. Steele bought his first santo, the Regis community of santos represents its collector as much as the objects represent place, time, culture, faith, and spirituality. And as the collection continues to grow, so do the opportunities for teaching and learning. 



Fig. 35: The Thomas J. Steele, S.J. Santo Gallery. Photo by Sean Gruno.

Notes

¹ Thomas J. Steele, S.J., *The Regis University Collection of New Mexico and Colorado Santos*. Unpublished, p. 147. *Santero* is a term that was used by scholars and adopted by 20th century saint-makers. Charles M. Carrillo notes that colonial artists would have been referred to as *pintores* (painters), *escultores* (sculptors), or *maestros* (masters); E. Boyd, *Saints and Saint Makers of New Mexico*, rev. ed., ed. Robin Farwell Gavin (Santa Fe: Western Edge Press, 1998), 24.

² Although “santo” means saint, for the purposes of the Regis santo collection, it refers more broadly to saints and other holy persons.

³ Thomas J. Steele, S.J., *The Regis Santos: Thirty Years of Collecting, 1966-1996* (Albuquerque: LPD Press, 1997), 4.

⁴ Thomas J. Steele, S.J., *Santos and Saints: Essays and Handbook* (Albuquerque: Calvin Horn Publisher, Inc., 1974); *Santos and Saints: The Religious Folk Art of Hispanic New Mexico* (Santa Fe: Ancient City Press, 1982 and 1994).

⁵ Some other early titles include: E. Boyd, *Saints and Saint Makers of New Mexico* (Santa Fe: Laboratory of Anthropology, 1946); Roland F. Dickey, *New Mexico Village Arts* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1949); José E. Espinosa, *Saints in the Valleys: Sacred Images in the History, Life and Folk Art of Spanish New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1960); Willard Houghland, *Santos: A Primitive American Art* (New York: Ellis Monroe and Jan Kleijkamp, 1946); George Mills, *The People of the Saints* (Colorado Springs: The Taylor Museum, 1967).

⁶ The use of the term “tradition” in this essay is based on historic characteristics of technique, materials, form, function and meaning; see J.C.H. King, “Tradition in Native American Art,” in *The Arts of the North American Indian: Native Traditions in Evolution*, ed. Edwin L. Wade (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1986), 67-69.

⁷ Thomas J. Steele, S.J., “True Confessions of a Santo Collector; or, Judge Mescal’s Gift to Regis,” *Tradición Revista* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 40.

⁸ Charles M. Carrillo and Thomas J. Steele, S.J., *A Century of Retablos: The Janis and Dennis Lyon Collection of New Mexican Santos, 1780-1880* (Phoenix: Phoenix Art Museum; New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2007), 58.

⁹ The frame was restored by Gustavo Victor Goler.

¹⁰ Carrillo and Steele, *A Century of Retablos*, 81.

¹¹ Carrillo and Steele, *A Century of Retablos*, 216.

¹² Carrillo and Steele, *A Century of Retablos*, p. 18; Robin Farwell Gavin, “Current Approaches to Problems in Attribution,” in *Transforming Images: New Mexican Santos in-between Worlds*, ed. Claire Farago and Donna Pierce (University

Park, PA.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 232-233.

¹³ *Santa Fe Visitors Guide* (Santa Fe: Ladd Haystead Advertising, 1931), 19; *Roads to Cibola: What to See in New Mexico and How to Get There* (Santa Fe: New Mexico State Highway Commission, 1929), 32, quoted in Thomas L. Riedel, “Tradition Reconfigured: Juan A. Sanchez, Patrocinio Barela, and New Deal Saint Making,” in *Transforming Images: New Mexican Santos in-between Worlds*, 216.

¹⁴ William Wroth, *Images of Penance, Images of Mercy: Southwestern Santos in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 64.

¹⁵ The phrase “Spanish Colonial” gained currency in the 1920s and 1930s even though much of the art dated from after 1821, the end of the colonial period, and the arts in question were more of Mexican than Spanish derivation. See William Wroth, “The Hispanic Craft Revival in New Mexico,” in *Revivals! Diverse Traditions, 1920-1945: The History of Twentieth-Century American Craft*, ed. Janet Kardon (New York: Harry Abrams, 1994), 85-86.

¹⁶ Daria Labinsky and Stan Hieronymous, *Frank Applegate of Santa Fe: Artist and Preservationist* (Albuquerque: LPD Press, 2001), 214.

¹⁷ Anne Evans, “A Christmas Pilgrimage in the Southwest,” Anne Evans Collection, Colorado Historical Society, Denver, Colorado, quoted in Riedel, “Tradition Reconfigured,” 218.

¹⁸ Steele, *The Regis University Collection of New Mexico and Colorado Santos*, p. 367.

¹⁹ Gilberto Espinosa, “New Mexico Santos,” *New Mexico Magazine* 18, nos. 3, 4, 5 (March, April, May, 1935). Fr. Steele credited Gilberto Espinosa as his first mentor in studying santos; Steele, *The Regis Santos*, 7.

²⁰ The saints depicted are: Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, San Isidro, San Francisco, Santo Niño de Atocha, Santa Bárbara, San Antonio de Padua, San Miguel.

²¹ Other santeros who made copies for the FAP included Santiago Mata, Ernesto Roybal, Isauro Padilla, Eddie Delgado, and Pedro Cervantez.

²² Juan A. Sanchez, “My Reproductions of New Mexican Santos,” unpublished manuscript, n.d. Mary Ellen Ferreira collection, Pinole, California, 1, quoted in Riedel, “Tradition Reconfigured,” 224.

²³ Riedel, “Tradition Reconfigured,” 224-225; “Relief Work,” *Time* 28, September 21, 1936, 42-43.

²⁴ Mildred Crews, Wendell Anderson, and Judson Crews, *Patrocinio Barela: Taos Wood Carver*, 3d ed. (Taos: Taos Recordings and Publications, 1976), p. 9.

²⁵ Kristin G. Congdon and Kara Kelley Hallmark, “Horacio Valdez,” in *American Folk Art: A Regional Reference* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO), 546.

²⁶ Spanish Colonial Arts Society, “Art Forms: Innovations within Tradition,” accessed March 8, 2017, <http://spanishcolonial.org/art-categories/>

²⁷ Steele, *The Regis University Collection of New Mexico and Colorado Santos*, 5, 138, 396.

²⁸ Fr. Steele maintained a 3-ring notebook of 35 mm slides to visually catalog the entire collection, but it has been missing since before he died in 2010.

²⁹ Steele, *The Regis Santos*, 16.