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SPIRITED SANTERA TO HOST CONFERENCE SPOUSES

A Visit with Monica Sosaya Halford

by Steven C. Yesner, AIA

Santa Fe artisan Monica Halford never lacks for inspiration. For the past 20 years, she has painted, sculpted and molded *retablos* (2-dimensional religious figures), *reredoses* (altar screens) with multiple *retablos* and *bultos* (3-dimensional and relief figures) of nearly every saint imaginable. And not just on boards or sheetmetal, but on windows, doors, walls, furniture, tiles and tapestries, even trees.

Ms. Halford will show her work and speak to the spouses and guests of the 1988 Santa Fe Design Conference attendees and exhibitors on Saturday, November 5.

The Making of a Saint Maker

Halford's New Mexican family heritage and upbringing in Santa Fe, like that of most Hispanic families, was rooted in traditional Catholic faith and devotion to the saints. "We grew up with *santos*," she says, "they were like part of the family."

Although she took lessons with Jozef Bakos, one of the famed "Cinco Pintores", while in high school, and later studied at the California College of Arts and Crafts, Halford did not set out to be a *santera*. But after a visiting friend asked to buy a *retablo* of San Pasqual she had made for her kitchen from childhood memories, she began sketching and studying early *retablos* in museums, churches and books, and developing her own style and techniques in earnest.

Today Halford's work receives major recognition in publications and exhibits devoted to American crafts, as well as private collections. Her *retablos* and needlepoint tapestries can be found in Constance Stapleton's book, *Crafts of America*, the Albuquerque Museum and Museum of New Mexico, the Immaculate Heart of Mary Seminary, area businesses and the annual Spanish Market in Santa Fe, where she has won prizes for her doors, paintings on tin, and reverse glass paintings.

She can talk at length and tell many anecdotes about the lives and significance of the saints she has researched. And friends who travel tell her new stories of saints from around the world.

"I always thought Santa Barbara was the patron saint of lightning and thunder; then I heard she was the patron saint of architects, too," relates Halford, whose husband is an architect. "It had something to do with a tower her father had built to



Monica Sosaya Halford with courtyard *retablo* at her Santa Fe studio. Photo by Marian Love.

imprison her, which was destroyed by lightning after her death, creating work for the architects. And Saint Thomas, the apostle, is always pictured with a scroll, which I now paint as a roll of blueprints.

Halford's *retablos* are known for their subtle colors reminiscent of antiques, and for their gentle humor and earthy beauty. She also collects *dichos* (parables) which she incorporates into the borders of her work. Says Halford, "I want my *retablos* to comfort those who buy them whether they believe in the saint or not."

A raffle of donated items, a luncheon and wine-and-cheese social are also scheduled.