

1954

Comment

University of New Mexico Press

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Recommended Citation

University of New Mexico Press. "Comment." *New Mexico Quarterly* 24, 3 (1954). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol24/iss3/13>

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COMMENT

SANTEROS OF TOMÉ

WHEN English-speaking groups first came into New Mexico, they found the homes as well as the churches of the native peoples filled with santos.¹ To most of the newcomers the figures appeared crude, gaudy, and somewhat barbarous. To the natives the images were imbued with the personalities of the saints they represented and hence were intimate and precious possessions. It is true that many of the bultos (carvings in the round) and retablos (paintings upon yesso-covered boards) show more devotion than perfection of workmanship—in spite of the belief that one who made an ugly santo would suffer a period of purgatory in proportion to his bad artistry.

The santeros (with few exceptions) did not sign their work. Research has yielded the names of only a very few artists. Consequently, the discovery of the identity of new santeros is almost as worthy an occasion for fiesta as a saint's day itself!

ANTONIO SILVA

THE VILLAGERS tell that in or about the year of our Lord 1800, a church was built in Valencia, twenty miles south of Albuquerque on the Camino Real. By frontier standards the community was prosperous, in spite of occasional raids by Apaches and Comanches, and by the freshets which swept down the Rio Grande with almost every spring thaw. The one really threatening problem was a quarrel which broke out among the people, and the patroness of the chapel, Nuestra Señora de los Mercedes, appeared powerless to stop the bickering and the fighting. Leaders in the strife were two brothers of good blood. Young ruffians, finding the somewhat monotonous life of a farming village delightfully spiced by periodic fracas, fanned the flames hopefully—and successfully. But the elders of the community were aghast at this internecine warfare and in their most firm and sonorous tones admonished: "Children, it is far better to live by the saints of our religion than by the brutality of the sword."

The words held power. Ill will began to subside and one day the people saw the elder of the two brothers making the dusty distance from his home to that of his brother on his knees. The younger brother came out to meet him in the patio; they embraced and sol

¹ *Santo*, or saint, is the Spanish word given to sculptures and paintings of holy personages and christian events, and the artist who made them is called a *santero*.

emly pledged to build a church where the road passed through the center of the community. The image of the ineffectual patron saint was relegated to a private chapel in the hills (where her identity was changed to that of St. Anne) and the new church was dedicated to The Most Precious Blood of Christ in atonement for the innocent blood shed in the feud and for their own bad example to the community.

When the church was completed Antonio Silva, earliest and finest of that area's several remembered santeros, brought out a large crucifix, the *Sangre de Cristo*,² which the community had commissioned for the new altar. There was feasting and dancing, the first of the modern Fiestas of Valencia. On the next day, July 1, the priest offered mass and the people responded with the song still used for this celebration:

*Hay una Fuente Carnesi
Que me Jesus abrió—
Muriendo en la cruz por mí—
Do³ limpio quedo yo.*

There is a scarlet fountain
Which my Jesus opened—
Dying upon the cross for me—
So that I might become clean.

In contrast to the majority of santeros, Silva had studied art in Spain or Portugal. In 1790, directly after reaching his new home in Adelino, a hamlet two miles south of Tomé, he started work on two figures for the Tomé church to express thanksgiving for his safe journey. These two were the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, later known as Nana Virgin, and an eight foot crucifix holding a Cristo as large as a slender young man.

The carving on this Cristo is delicate, realistic, and the proportions accurate. The forehead and cheek bones are high, the cheeks sunken, and the face thin. The eyes are downcast, modeled as well as painted. The nose is very slim, the mouth slightly open but with none of the crudity seen in many. The sternum, ribs and collarbones are carefully portrayed as those of a man whose weight hung on his arms, and the abdomen shows careful musculature. The arms and the hollow of the underarms are in good proportion, and the hands show the curve of

² In 1938 this crucifix was taken to the Church of Cristo Rey in Santa Fe by Archbishop Gerken who, in a long and flattering sermon, explained that he was "stealing" the fine piece and carrying it away as the conquest of his lifetime. This was a unique compliment to one of the best of New Mexico's santeros, for from the time of Bishop Lamy to the present, most of the churchmen have appreciated little of the artistry in native late 18th and early 19th century religious folk art. The figure in the south chapel of Cristo Rey today, where the Estrella figure is said to have been hung, does not resemble Silva's known work in style and makes it almost certain that his *Sangre de Cristo* must have been placed elsewhere.

³ The word "do" is as sung.

flesh between the finger joints. The kilt (usually covered with a lace-edged length of white satin) is smooth except for the brisk drape at the right side, and from below it extend the finely modeled legs with strong calves and the wide feet of one accustomed to sandals rather than to the confinement of modern shoes. In each knee is a depressed triangular wound and in the right breast a gash.

One could almost suppose that Silva had a model for his figure. And for the back—no doubt he did, for it is the scarred and roughened back of a Penitente, and on each side are cut the three slits of the Brotherhood. In the past, on the Via Crucis, a song formerly was sung in the Flamenco manner, now considered old-fashioned by the people of the area:

On the road we saw Jesus, the Nazareno,
The Creator, the Savior of this world, walking sadly,
On his back he carried the weight of five thousand lashes—

In Constancia the old Flamenco hymn imploring grace through the five major wounds of the Christ still is sung, although in modern Tomé it is heard no longer.

Unfortunately the original painting of the Cristo has been covered by later "retouching" in oil paint. The Silva crown of three cords twisted together and painted green has been replaced by a silver crown made in Isleta four or five years ago, though no one now knows by whom or at whose commission. This crucifix is carried in the arms of one of the men in the procession which makes the circuit of the plaza on the evening of Holy Wednesday.

Nana Virgin—five feet tall—is even more important than the Silva crucifix in the religious life of Tomé. Her face is that of a young Spanish woman of high birth, although its original thin and soft coloring has been obscured by the flat coat of enamel-like paint now covering the surface. The lines of the face are more rounded than those of the Cristo. The eyes are set in like those in the heads ordered from Europe for the Tomé bultos of Dolores and Soledad, but they have been repainted until it is impossible to see whether the eyeballs are of glass, ordered from Mexico, or of baked clay, perhaps made by an Indian potter. When tapped they sound more like clay.

The hair is a wig, gift of one girl and then of another through the years. The torso and original painted robe are seen nowadays only by the women who care for her wardrobe of silken dresses, the gifts of brides and local seamstresses. If one lifts a hem, soft colored flowers and leaves painted in tempera may be seen as a six inch band finishing

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ST. JOHN EVANGELIST.
(Edwin Baca, 1953)



NANA VIRGIN.



CRUCIFIX IN TOME CHURCH

(Antonio Silva, 1795)

off the rough hewn torso, intended to be covered with robes of cloth. Nana Virgin already has traveled through the town of Tomé in procession on some 600 occasions, counting the customary two per year for her own saint's day (September eighth), Holy Week, and in the past, on June second, the commemorative visit of the pregnant Virgin to her kinswoman who was to become mother of John the Baptist.

After a few years in Adelino, Silva moved to Valencia, where he met and married the sister of Bartolomé Baca, later to become governor of New Mexico. Antonio Silva's descendants and most of the people in the area claim him to have been a good painter, as well as a maker of bultos, and point to his early classical training in art as background for the series of oils, each measuring three by five feet, hanging high on the walls of the nave of the Tomé church. Time has darkened these somewhat and their distance from the floor prevents a full and easy view. Still one pauses to spend some time before that at the east end of the row—a figure of John the Baptist in which the well-cut features show the artist's intention of emphasizing John's close relationship to the Christ. The other paintings depict St. Peter with his Keys, St. Paul with his Sword, St. Matthew, St. Luke, St. John the Evangelist, St. John the Baptist, and the Immaculate Conception—the latter being the only one recognized by the villagers as the copy of a Spanish masterpiece. There are also paintings of three Doctors of the early Church, who appear to be St. Augustin, St. Dominic, and St. Benedict. Although in vitality Silva's bultos surpass these paintings, the academic quality of the latter has led some to surmise that they were shipped in as part of the furnishings given New Mexico churches and were not made locally.

Silva may have received many orders for work to decorate chapels and churches of the Rio Abajo. The difficulty of tracing and identifying is great. At least one small crucifix (in the collection of the author) from Isleta appears to be of Silva's workmanship.

DONATO ESTRELLA

A LATER ARTIST in Tomé, Donato Estrella, was popular both for his jovial personality and for his work. He came up from Mexico (about 1908) where he had been a stone cutter and something of an architect. Later, after the death of his wife, having no family ties here (his children had died in infancy), he returned to Mexico.

Father John Baptist Ralliére, parish priest of Tomé for fifty-six years, commissioned Estrella to paint a *Divino Rostro*, the face of

Christ which appeared upon the napkin held by Veronica against His face on the Via Crucis. The new painting was to replace one grown fragile by age. The portrait, clearly and well executed upon a piece of linen measuring twenty-three inches square and signed by Estrella, is a copy of the head of Christ frequently seen in the illustrations of religious books. It still is used in the old miracle play pageant (*La Pasión*) of Good Friday.

Estrella wanted to contribute a figure to the growing number of statues in the Tomé church, but, lacking suitable stone and not being versed in wood carving, he attempted experiments in cement. As a compliment to Ralliére, his very good friend, his first figure in concrete was Joan of Arc. The local appellation, "The Heavy Lady," reflects not only the cumbersome weight of this image when an attempt is made to carry it, but also her chunky proportions. Estrella's second image in concrete was that of Ralliére's name saint. John the Baptist, in local tradition, was a giant; certainly Estrella depicted him as a very large man, holding in his left hand a Bible upon which rests a small figure of the Lamb of God. In the right is a shepherd's staff in the form of a cross. The image is considerably more successful than his "Heavy Lady."

In contrast to some of the other French priests brought into New Mexico by Bishop Lamy, Father Ralliére never destroyed the native-made santos. He did, however, order a few "factory-made" images such as that of San Ysidro Labrador (popular patron of farmers). The figure differed from those usually made in New Mexico in being without the plow and yoke of oxen characteristically mounted with the saint upon a single board. The lack was remedied by a devout woman of the parish, Doña Teresita Zamora Sedillo (Estrella's relative by marriage), who fashioned two heavy-legged but cheerful-faced *bueyos* from cement—and tied blue ribbons around their necks!

When Father Ralliére realized that his own years were few, he carefully returned to Mrs. Sedillo certain santos which years before she had lent for church use. These she promptly moved to a shrine-room in her home, one of the oldest in the village.

On the west wall of the room Donato Estrella painted—and signed—a background scene based upon his favorite description of the Virgin: "She was the commandant of cherubs, angels, and archangels as numerous as grains of wheat in the harvest"—words of an old hymn. At the base, a long altar-like shelf was constructed, draped, decorated with paper flowers, and filled with santos and the little cement animal figures—sheep, oxen, burros—with which Doña Teresita occupied her

spare hours. There were three old Santo Niños, images of the infant Jesus such as are placed in a crib at the altar during the Christmas season. There was a small dark figure of Dolores, which family legend states was carried from Tomé to El Paso in the flight of the Spaniards in 1680, and which was returned when the family came back to reclaim their lands after De Vargas' re-conquest. The tiny saint was of a size easily permitting such transportation. There was also the taller San José, a dashing figure with a patrician head carved in Mexico, painted in fine colors, and never mentioned except as Señor San José, even in family documents. And in the center was the tall and stately Reina de los Cielos, Queen of the Heavens.

THE QUEEN

THE QUEEN is probably the oldest of all Tomé's santos. No one knows where she was carved nor by whom. In 1858 Doña Teresita's father-in-law, Don Juan José Sedillo, while riding near the river, discovered her standing in a *carrizal*, a clump of native bamboo-like reed. The hands and arms were missing, the head and face badly weathered, cracked, and scarred. It is told that bows and arrows lay at her feet.

It is possible that the figure could have been placed by the river as a prayer for rain or a deterrent to floods. Its size and quality mark it as coming from a church, or from the private chapel of one who could afford to import his needs from Mexico. Private chapels were not uncommon in the large Spanish ranch establishments of colonial New Mexico, and the *carrizal* which hid the Virgin was only about a half mile from the ranch occupied in the late 18th century by the Madariagas. This ranch is known as the oldest in the area and probably was that owned by Thomé Dominguez y Mendoza in the second half of the 17th century. The site, washed by recurrent river floods, is only one-third of a mile from the base of Cerro Thomé and six or seven miles from Valencia. De Vargas placed the Thomé Dominguez ranch two leagues from Valencia.

Thomé Dominguez was a prominent captain and politician, as well as rancher, in the days before the Pueblo Rebellion. The period was one of strife, Church against State, and Thomé Dominguez sided with the Church, even to the extent of bearing witness before the Inquisition that certain government officials had permitted masks and dances to exist in Isleta Pueblo and hence were guilty of fostering idolatry.

Such a man presumably would have had his private chapel, dedicated to his patroness The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, and its equipment, like that of the other churches and chapels, would have been hidden or abandoned in the terror-filled days after the Rebellion broke, before the flight southward began. Neither Thomé Dominguez nor his family returned to their New Mexican lands.

At first thought it seems almost impossible that an exposure of approximately 175 years would not do more damage than young Mrs. Sedillo could remedy even by cleaning the figure, attaching carved hands, new arms of stuffed buckskin, filling all cracks with burned lime mixed with egg white, and carefully repainting the surface. But we know that beam ends, though not split and weathered, have lasted since early in the Christian era in some Southwestern Indian ruins. If identification of the original chapel from which this santo came is correct, she must be considered a contemporary of the famous La Conquistadora of Santa Fe. The bows and arrows laid at the feet of the Tomé figure may have been offerings of Isleta Indians, who never joined the Rebellion, accepted more Catholicism than most Pueblos, acted as temporary hosts to the fleeing Spaniards, and—in part—accompanied them to El Paso.

When the statue was found, Father Ralliére ordered that the figure be brought into the church with due pomp and devotion. The villagers already were speaking of her as Nuestra Señora del Carrizál, but the Padre decreed her to be the Queen of Heaven, no one knowing which of the Virgins she originally had represented. (An image of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception shows no special attributes.) A wig of long black hair and a brass crown were made for her, and robes were sewn. A fifteen inch section of the pedestal was sawed off and wooden cupids nailed at the base.

Her shrine, which Doña Teresita tended throughout her lifetime remained in the old house until 1953, when Mrs. Montañó, a daughter, moved the figures into a front room of her own home.

OTHER SANTEROS OF TOMÉ

A SHORT DISTANCE south of Adelina is the shrine of Francisco Padilla, still maintained by his wife. A slightly shorter than life-size image of St. Francis of Assisi, holding a book, dominates the small adobe hall. He was patron of Mr. Padilla, at whose birth the shrine was built by his father. The figure was locally constructed, although no one seems to remember the name of the santero. The torso and up

per legs consist of padded framework. The robe is a Franciscan habit of canvas, painted brown. A smaller figure of St. Francis Xavier—older than the Assisi—also is present, but its history is unknown.

The Jesus Nazareno of the Tomé church is of about the same size as this large San Francisco, and some suggest that both may have come from the shop of one santero working in Adelino in the late 1800's, although others think they have heard that the Nazareno was the work of a woman. The carefully modeled hands of San Francis, which even show the raised veins, lead one to wonder whether Silva himself may not have been the sculptor; they are very like those of the Christ and also of Juan Nepomuceno.

This Jesus Nazareno, who stands throughout the year in a little "jail" of stakes to represent Christ after his betrayal by Judas, became the center of discussion in October, 1918, when someone noticed that his robe—periodically washed and ironed by the ladies responsible for the wardrobes of these santos—bore perspiration marks beneath the arms. As this was a portentous sign, no one was surprised when the Armistice halting World War I was announced on November 11. Not until 1945 was a recurrence of the perspiration stains announced, and the lady first to call the attention of her wondering neighbors to the phenomenon quickly surmised that the precipitous ending of World War II was being foreshadowed. Two weeks later newspapers and radios blazed with news that the war was over. The robe of the santo was left unwashed until the returned veterans could view the evidence of this miracle. The garb was clean and fresh to smell, but the stain was unquestionable.

The old San Juan Nepomuceno, made by Silva or by a disciple about 1795, came to the Tomé chapel from a family in Adelino which annually had carried him down to the river on June 24 as San Juan Bautista. In Tomé he was carried in the annual Easter processions as San Juan Evangelista. When the truth of these accidental aliases was discovered, a young veteran, Edwin Baca, deeply imbued with the desire to keep alive in his community the historic ceremonialism of his ancestors, set himself the task of carving a proper Evangelist. (In 1946 he and Fred Landavozo, a student at the University of New Mexico, had fashioned a Mary Magdalene for the Easter Procession.) The new San Juan, blessed by a visiting cleric from South America, made his first tour of the plaza in the Holy Week processions of 1953.

Tomé has become modern in late years, but has not yet lost the treasure of its linkage with the past.

FLORENCE HAWLEY ELLIS