

# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53RD STREET, NEW YORK

TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 7-7470

## NEW MEXICO'S FOLK ART

New Mexico's Spanish-colonial art is revealed as an authentic American design tradition in the exhibition, New Horizons in American Art, which opens at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, on September 16. From the beginning of the Spanish colonization of the region now New Mexico, folk art of peculiar beauty flourished there. Brought to this country from Spain, this art took on the form and ideas of the new land inhabited by Indians with arts at least a thousand years old. The folk art of Mexico and New Mexico shows the influence of these two esthetic strains. The Spanish-Colonial portfolio of fifty watercolor plates of the Index of American Design of the Federal Art Project preserves this artistic legacy for the nation in permanent form. Selected plates will be exhibited in New Horizons in American Art.

From the 16th century through the 19th, saints painted and carved by provincial artists adorned the New Mexican churches, these being the "santos retablos" and "santos bultos" of the Index's portfolio. "Santos" are pictures of saints painted on tablets or small plaques of wood. Santos "bultos"--literally "saints in the bulk"--are sculptures in wood, carved in the round, sometimes with cloth superimposed and then painted. The bultos have a very gay air, bedecked with ribbons and Christmas-tree ornaments left at all seasons by pious believers. Other forms of New Mexican art are painted and carved chests, specimens of which have been discovered by accident in New Mexican houses in the mountains far back from main highways and cities; paintings on buffalo hides, tin frames hammered into decorative patterns for saints' pictures; and woven blankets, in harmonious colors.

Today the santos, bultos, chests and blankets are recognized as original and beautiful works of art. But many of them still remain hidden away in remote and distant New Mexican villages, like Chimayo, whose Santuario may be called a modern Canterbury. New Mexico is a vast state, 400 miles square, more than large enough to contain all

New England comfortably within its boundaries. It is a land of towering mountain ranges and deep canyons, mesas and valleys, bright sun and sudden rainstorms. Because of these climatic and geographic factors, even in today's age of rapid transportation, villages often are reached only with great difficulty. Thus it is possible for fine examples of the region's old culture to survive in remote localities, untouched by modern progress and unknown.

"The art of the Spanish-Colonial period is one of the great folk arts of the world and goes far beyond the mere peasant flair to decorate surfaces and prettify spaces," writes Donald Bear, Director of the Denver Art Museum and regional director of the Federal Art Project, under whose auspices the portfolio is being made. "It is an art which may be looked upon as even more legitimate material and more traditional to this section than the art of the American Indian, which is a race alien in blood to our culture. If the Art Project had added nothing but this portfolio, it would be making a contribution which would far more than justify these activities of the United States government."

The artist executing the drawings and master plates for the Spanish-Colonial portfolio is E. Boyd, one of the younger artists of the Rio Grande valley. With Santa Fe as headquarters, Miss Boyd is scouring New Mexico to discover more and better examples of the original material widely scattered in churches and chapels throughout the state. After the master plate is made in opaque water color, a key block is cut in linoleum or wood and the prints turned over to assistant artists for coloring. Each portfolio of the edition of two hundred will have an introduction describing the individual plates and the saints represented therein.

Besides the work being carried on under Miss Boyd's direction, a parallel work is being done in Denver by Mrs. Maude Fiorentino-Vallé, a 70-year-old artist. Mrs. Vallé's plates are unique copies, water-colors which exist only in the one original.

Painted chests from the collection of Carlos Vierra of New Mexico are also being recorded by the Index of American Design. Renderings are also being made of old Spanish-Colonial embroidery, of

examples which are essentially museum pieces. Other design material being recorded is the straw inlay work, imitating European marquetry; tombstones and cattle brands, unique in design value; and design motifs from painted furniture of the period, all to be illustrated at the Museum of Modern Art.

The charm of Spanish-Colonial art lies in the contrast between the simple native styles and the elaborate foreign influences from which the designs were derived. Here are echoes of old Byzantine mosaics and murals, of ancient Catalonian frescoes. In these santos, bultos and painted chests the forms and ideas of Spain live on in New Mexico.

The impact of Spain on New Mexico has resulted in a strange balance between formal quality and emotional intensity, expressed in the santos and bultos through a primitive innocence. There is often a wistful elegance about the saints' very postures and attitudes, as well as in their austere painted faces. Yet the style is by no means representational; it has the common attribute of the best art of all ages, whether primitive or self-conscious, the sense that form and organization have been imposed by the artist on his subject. It is not mere tourist enthusiasm which makes visitors to New Mexico return to their homes singing the praises of the region's folk art; it is an understanding, even if only an intuitive understanding, that here is an authentic tradition for American art.

