

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART EXHIBITS SAINTS, ANGELS AND GARDEN OF EDEN  
CARVED IN WOOD BY SPANISH-AMERICAN FOLK ARTISTS

An exhibition particularly appropriate to Easter week opens to the public Wednesday, April 28, at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, to be on view through June 13. It is Religious Folk Art of the Southwest and consists of eighty bultos (figures carved in the round) and retablos (painted panels) most of which have been lent by the Taylor Museum of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. This art was produced in the American Southwest during the years 1725 to 1875 by humble priests and lay members of small churches in the poverty-stricken region from southern Colorado to the Mexican border. Like early New England's itinerant portrait painters, carvers of wooden Indians and ships' figureheads, the Spanish-American santeros (makers of saints) are almost entirely anonymous.

These wooden figures of the saints, the Virgin, the Christ, painted in rich reds, earthy browns, blacks, golden ochres, dull greens and occasional blues, stand in the ground floor galleries facing the Museum's sculpture garden. With tiny wooden dove perched on her breast and wreath of flowers in her hair, the Santa Niña (the Virgin as a child) is poised on a globe painted with winged cherubs while around her rises a wooden bower of carved angels. San Ysidro, patron saint of farmers, in the costume of a charro or Mexican country gentleman, plows behind a pair of oxen with an angel at his side. Santa Barbara, patroness of artillerymen and miners, is represented as a round-eyed little figure with a wooden crown on her head and a cluster of bright silk flowers dangling from one hand, standing beside a diminutive tower, symbol of the one from which she escaped. Job the Afflicted is a melancholy figure in a shrine made from an old oil can--an article which supplied New Mexico craftsmen with much of the tin they used for ornamental work.

The most distinguished piece in the exhibition is the Penitente Death Angel in its crude cart, with bow and arrow poised. This extraordinary piece of folk sculpture, carved four generations ago in Cordova, New Mexico, was drawn in the procession of Penitente flagellants during Holy Week. Real hair is attached to the wooden

skull of the Angel and a leather thong holds it on the high seat of the cart.

The Penitente Death Cart with its Angel is attributed to the grandfather of José Dolores Lopez, a contemporary wood carver of Cordova, who carried on the woodcarving craft of his father and grandfather until his death a few years ago; now his own children and grandchildren continue the work. A revered and influential member of the Penitente cult, he made his living carving boxes, towel racks, frames for screen doors and other useful objects. For his own joy he carved animals and birds and a few religious figures. He is represented in the exhibition by a number of these, chief among them The Garden of Eden. This ambitious piece shows a sorrowful Adam with bowed head and an Eve, arm outstretched in farewell to the Tree of Life on which grow all manner of fruit and leaves pegged into the branches. Almost concealed in the luxuriant branches the face of Satan peers out, his snake-body coiled strongly around the trunk of the Tree. Beside Adam and Eve is a fence blossoming with foliage and fruit, symbolizing the Garden itself.

Materials such as tin, bits of cloth, paper flowers, and in some cases changes of costume, are an integral part of many of the bultos. Particularly in the case of figures used in the ceremonies of the Penitentes, complete wardrobes and accessories are often provided. One of the largest pieces in the exhibition is the Santo Entierro, Christ in the Sepulchre: a large wooden coffin of grill-work represents the tomb in which the recumbent figure of Christ is placed on pillows and sachets of flower petals after it is taken down from the Cross; later in the ceremonies it is resurrected from the tomb. The jaw, neck and other parts of this figure are movable to allow proper gestures, and are operated puppet-fashion by strings.

Also included in the exhibition is a painted altar--humble descendant of the great cathedral altars of Spain. Originally set in the adobe wall of a church in the Santa Cruz Valley, it is of hand-hewn planks with five painted panels which represent St. Lawrence, the Holy Trinity, Bishop Athanasius (author of the Apostle's Creed), the Madonna of the Rosary, and St. Joseph. In the niche is a bulto of our Lady of Jarmel.

During the early eighteenth century permanent Spanish colonies in the form of small agricultural communities were established along the Rio Grande River in northern New Mexico. Thanks to these colonies, with their tiny mission churches, on the most remote frontier of

Spain in the New World, we have an indigenous Christian folk art within the boundaries of the United States. It was not until the late nineteenth century, when cheap religious prints and mass-produced plaster figures of saints became available, that this folk art of the American Southwest declined.

Far removed from the metropolitan centers in Mexico, the Rio Grande santeros worked with extreme devotion under conditions of severest poverty where only the most commonplace materials were available. The retablos are generally slabs of pine wood; the bultos are carved usually from cottonwood, a soft, pithy material easily worked with crude tools. Both bultos and retablos are covered with a crude gesso, or plaster made of native gypsum and animal glue, on which the vegetable and mineral colors are applied. Drapery is sometimes carved, sometimes made by a still easier process: a piece of cloth is dipped in plaster, draped on the figure, and painted when dry and hard.

The exhibition was assembled by Mitchell A. Wilder, Curator of the Taylor Museum of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, which has the largest and finest collection of this type of art in the world. Supplementing the exhibition a small group of photographs of New Mexico will be shown, including the work of Paul Strand, Ernest Knee, Edward Weston and Ansel Adams. The exhibition of Religious Folk Art of the Southwest has been installed by Dorothy C. Miller, Associate Curator of Painting and Sculpture for the Museum.