

The Carpinteros of New Mexico

Native American, Spanish and Mexican influences in Santa Fe style

by Kurt Faust

The woodworkers of New Mexico have always been at the forefront of creating the details of Santa Fe Style. When Onate came to settle New Mexico in 1598 with his entourage of hundreds only a handful were listed as carpenters or carpinteros. These men likely were trained in the well established guild system of Mexico and each brought with him the few simple tools in his possession like; a few axes, an adze, a couple of chisels, and maybe a saw or an auger. The guilds in Mexico trained their members well. At the highest level the carpinteros were trained to make waterwheels, wine presses, catapults, and various kinds of machinery. At the middle levels they were trained to make chests, doors, desks, and free standing cabinets. Here in the frontier of New Mexico resources were limited and the pressures of subsistence were such that the scope of the craft remained rudimentary and unchanged for almost two and one half-centuries.

Prior to the Spanish arriving, the local native population had used stone tools to cut trees for roofs and make ladders. Even the earliest pit houses had the same prototypal roof structure widely used until the 20th century. Large 6 to 8 inch logs were laid flat on support posts or exterior walls first. Perpendicular to these was a layer of smaller 1 to 2 inch poles. Brush and twigs were placed next and covered with a layer of dirt and adobe mud. This construction style, when augmented by the adobe brick making introduced by the Spanish, formed the basic dwelling built during the Colonial period. Although there was another less used method called Jacal making a less durable wall by placing posts in postholes at intervals and weaving lighter sized sticks or stalks between them and then plastering both sides with adobe. This was the extent of the lay skills employed by the average farmer providing for his family. Windows and doors might be non-existent or covered with a buffalo hide to keep out the elements.

The mission churches were the significant structures built during the 1600's. Most of the labor for these structures was provided by the Native Americans in each community. Each friar had a "kit" containing the basic tools for building a church and for subsistence living. It is probable that the friar needed the help of one of the few Spanish carpinteros to make the doors, windows and the railings of the choir and at the altar. Most of the missions were destroyed during the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, but there are a few that were not totally destroyed and were repaired when the Spanish returned twelve years later, notably the churches at Zia, Isleta, Acoma, and Zuni. These show fine examples of the earliest woodworking done here in New Mexico.

The furniture surviving from the first two centuries shows that a rigid proportional system was used and was based on unit of measure called the vara which was about 33inches. The wills and estate records show they were predominately storage trunks and chairs with some tables and benches and a few free standing storage cabinets. It is with the surface embellishment that we find the first vernacular expression of what would become our regional style. One very famous set of chests or cajas was made over a period of time in Northern New Mexico, possibly Velarde, all exhibiting a similar raised panel style, heavy chip carving and diagonal braces for the legs.

Over time the strict forms regulated by the Spanish guild system lost influence and the carpinteros

began to make doors and furniture using the materials at hand. One popular method of decoration was cutting the same pattern out on two boards and then placing the designs side by side creating an interesting negative shape. The splats used on chair backs or in cabinet doors showed a wide variation of shapes and patterns. Evidence exists that the Native Americans were involved in making furniture, first as apprentices, and their influence is seen in some of the other motifs in the early furniture. The cloud terrace, stair-step pattern, symbolizes the heavens and rain and other motifs came from Pueblo pottery decorations. Cochiti Pueblo was known for its own distinctive style of carving.

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries it was illegal for New Mexicans to trade with anyone but Mexico. Traders who wandered in from the east or west would often have their goods confiscated and be arrested. Caravans from Mexico would come every three years. The region had a very limited supply of metal tools and other everyday items needed to scrape out a living in the arid country. This continued even after Mexico declared independence from Spain. New Mexico was so far away and the people so poor that Mexico City paid very little attention to Santa Fe.

Independence from Mexico in 1821 marked the beginning of the Santa Fe Trail from Missouri. New Mexico was hungry for the material goods which came pouring in from the wagon trains: goods such as guns, cloth, sewing notions, farming tools, glass and other building materials. With the arrival of adequate tools and new immigrants from the United States, the numbers and skills of carpenters increased. With the import of nails the use of moldings as decorations rose dramatically. The rest of the world was in the midst of an Industrial Revolution. It was slowly coming to New Mexico. In 1846 Stephen Kearney invaded Santa Fe and claimed it for the United States. In 1848 the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo established New Mexico as a U.S. territory. At this time the Army constructed the first saw mill in Santa Fe at the end of Upper Canyon Road. The next few decades saw the construction of several forts in the region. This ushered in what is know as the Territorial Style.

One of the defining characteristics of Territorial style is the use of a triangular pediment over the doors and windows. The proliferation of saw mills allowed the use of more milled lumber. The wood was often painted white in simulation of the Greek Revival architecture it was imitating. Two story homes with verandas at both levels and wood floors became common. Elaborate moldings were incorporated in the railings, posts, doors and windows. Wood shutters became common. Bricks, which began to be manufactured in New Mexico in the 1880's were used to cap the adobe parapets.

During this time, the vernacular expression of New Mexico woodworking reached its zenith. It was a time of unsophisticated naive creativity culminating in doors and cabinets of extraordinary regional design and detail and was due to the numbers of good carpenters, the availability of materials, the invention of the scroll saw, and the presence of a multitude of fresh creative architectural influences. It was this history and legacy that the artists and writers of the 1920's and 1930's drew upon to re-create Santa Fe Style as we know it today.

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