

## Southwestern Arts

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A REGION of arid plains tilted upwards to merge in the violent crinklings of the surrounding mountains; wide spaces vanishing in the sky line, hills and obtrusions resting in a misty green and tan spotted sea of the mesquite, rabbit bush, greasewood, and cactus with colored trailings of the golden yellow palo verde and the rosy bloom ocotillo — that is the Southwest, a land of distances and rioting color. In this region two artistic cultures have fructified; the art of the Pueblo Indians has been "discovered," while Spanish Colonial is just going through the throes of a reawakening.

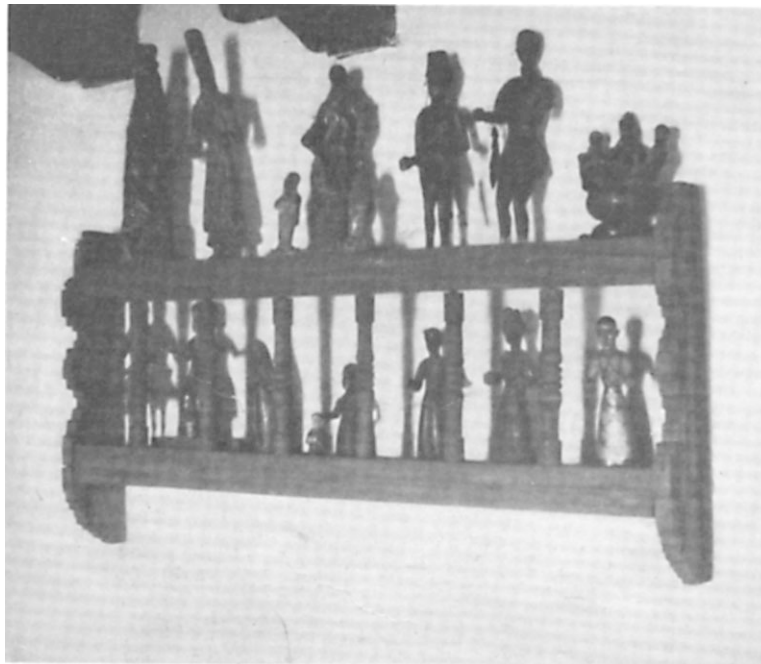
The desire for artistic expression is apparently universal; man has possessed, since pre-historic epochs, a fair abundance of leisure time; he has experienced the lulling palliative of security; and he is familiar with the play of introspection and thought's outward thrustings. Not only does man want to depict the sun as it registers on the retina of the eye but also in keeping with his socio-religious psychology. As Mary R. Coolidge says in her recent book, "The Rain-makers," — "to the inarticulate human spirit design and decoration seem to be as necessary as food and drink are to the human body. We can but suppose this need of beauty was stimulated by the marvelously, fiercely colored landscape of the Southwest. Just as the solitary mountain sheep often stand on rocky rim or promontory to gaze, so the wild Indian must have come to find pleasure in far, broken horizon, in the

play of light and color." The animal world has not been able to reach further than evolutionary modifications in itself to create beauty; though we cannot comprehend the processes and connecting thoughts, we must conclude that the only explanation of brilliant colored feathers on a male bird

contrasted with the sombre shades of the female (she must think of inconspicuousness in protecting her young) signifies that birds have had the thought problems of security and beauty to contend with. The human being, however, has taught himself how to mould worldly materials to his imaginative and impressed convictions.

Cultural history reveals that geography,

climate, and the resulting environment exert an influence on the shaping of a culture. In the Southwest there are tremendous contrasts and nature is apt to be violent in her moods. The ever-pressing need is rain so that the crops will be bountiful and food abundant. The whole landscape shows the effect of the dearth of rains and the direness of the storms when they do come. The Pueblo Indians developed an indigenous culture and in speaking of this Henry Smith says that the Indians have found the secret of the adjustment to Southwestern environment. Journeying through New Mexico one catches glimpses of the adobe houses in earth brown color and in severe squatting lines. Man's handiwork melts into nature's and one feels a sense of appropriateness. The Spanish who entered



Courtesy of Frank G. Applegate

"Santos" Figurines — Spanish Colonial

New Mexico during the sixteenth century in a quest for gold, settling there permanently from the end of the century onwards, built their culture on more or less the same lines as the Pueblos and though they retained many of their European refinements, the groundings of their arts are pervaded with a foundation in the Southwest peculiarities. In the article "New Mexico Backgrounds," Mr. Frank G. Applegate says of these cultures — "Of the two, the Pueblo Indian culture is the less comprehensible to us for there is little in our own background to aid us in appreciating it. The art of the Pueblo Indian shows an undisturbed cultural development through long ages as though it were finished and the last word had been said. The Spanish Colonial art, while it was executed by a people of supposedly higher civilization, seems in contrast both culturally and technically primitive and unfinished." Considering the handicaps that the Spanish labored under, however, their achievement is remarkable. The Indian started with nothing and developed a restricted but perfect culture; the Spanish were thrown into a new environment and obliged to reconstruct their culture to fit the surroundings about them.

The Pueblo Indians do not look on art as one phase in the life circle; it represents an all-pervading part to them and consequently is of serious import in the religious ceremony and in the general conduct of their lives. One duty of the women is the grinding of the corn; this is a laborious task and to relieve the tedium a man stands by the door of the room in which the grinding is in process, playing a fife or singing while the women move the stones in time to the music and sing together. Not only do they carry their art thusly into their daily tasks but also they do not dissociate it from the

technical process as we are accustomed to do. Natalie Curtis relates that when she asked a young Hopi composer which came first in his song, words or music, he replied in bewilderment, "I make a song, a song is words and music — all comes together."



*Courtesy of Frank G. Applegate*

*Cabinet — Spanish Colonial*

We are accustomed to look at art from its aesthetic standpoint; rhythm in line, harmony in color, and beauty of composition are our criterions; and we have paid little regard to esoteric significance. The art of the Indians, however, is fundamentally esoteric and based on the belief that everything in nature has a spiritual counterpart or "Katchina" which determines its form and relation to other things. In maintaining relations with these spirits the Pueblos created their dramatic and other art forms. The formulation of elaborate systems of symbolism has been a concomitant.

All forms in Indian art have been worked and reworked in the projection of symbolism — numbered amongst these are the Eagle or Thunder-bird, butterfly, cloud forms, rain, lightning, whirlwind, and water animals. As the Indian strives to depict the spirit or Katchina, his efforts are directed

towards conveying impressions of moving and completed actions rather than realistic portrayals of a figment in the march of reality. The Hopi have been greatly impressed by the bird's power of flight. To represent this the wing and the feather were adopted as the best symbol of flight. Indians impart their concept of spirit not only to the animate but also to the inanimate and even place it in their own handiwork. Nanpeyo, a famous Hopi potter, while firing her wares talks to the spirits that are dwelling in the shell of the pot and beseeches them to be complaisant so that the pot may not be destroyed in their attempt to escape.

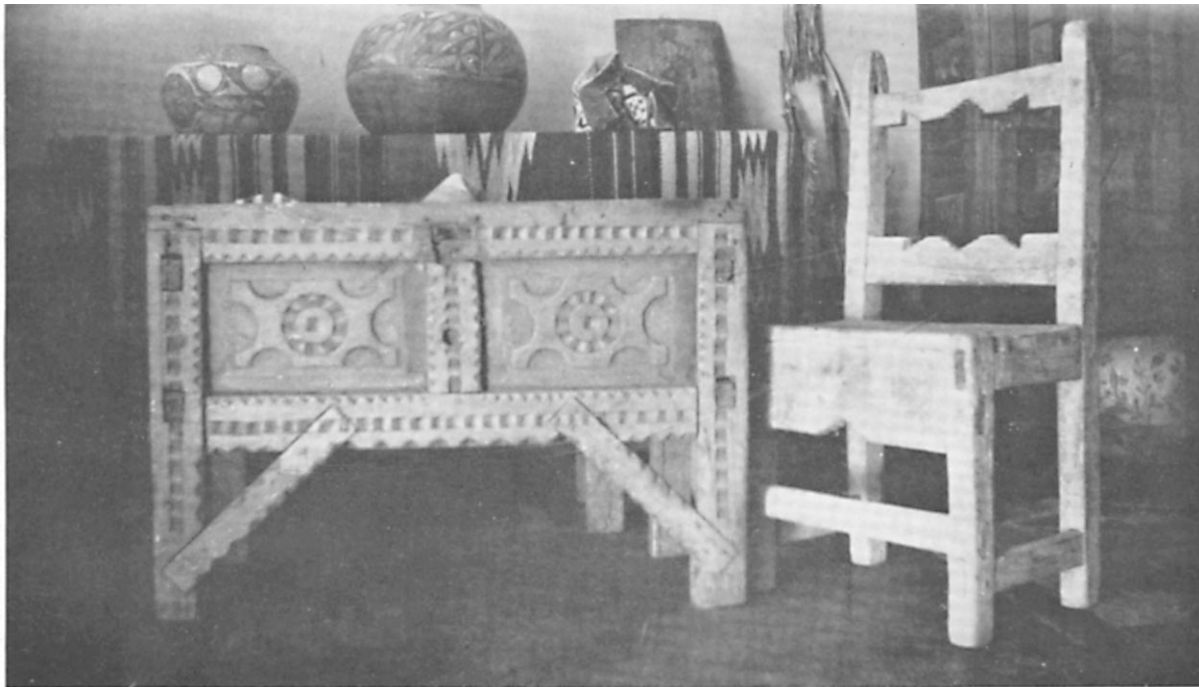
Mrs. Stevenson observed in Zuni Pueblos that small pieces of wafer bread were deposited in bowls "so that the spirit of the vase might be fed with the spiritual essence of the bread."

Our lack of comprehension of the spiritual content in Indian art is the reason why it is so alien to us and also why we are not able to appreciate the perfection in their arts. We judge Indian art, dance, and drama by our standards; they do not conform in many particulars and consequently we look at them in a disparaging manner. In his book on the primitive mind, Levy Bruhl devotes attention to this important problem. The West must come to realize that its scheme of philosophy, its art, and its cultures, though great, are not necessarily superior to those of other races and perhaps are unfit for any other peoples but the white man. Psychological differences can be so great that almost no grounds of meeting exist. A willingness to look at things the way another person does would remove a lot of the grief that exists in life and enable us to appreciate the universe in its true light. The fact that Indians conceive of everything as possessing a Katchina, or spirit, means that a tree, bird, or the sun has not the same set of components in their eyes as in ours; as a result they handle these motifs contrary to our practice and if we are to appreciate or understand their art, we must delve into its psychology.

Indian art is symbolic and geometric; yet it displayed few signs of staleness till the inroads of

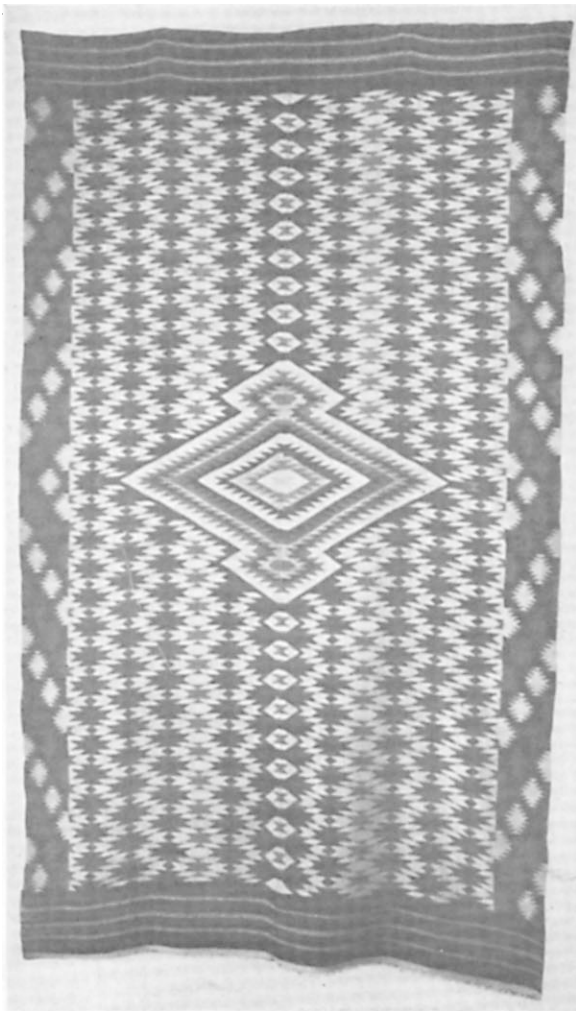
commercialism, and has remained as vitalizing as our arts which are postured in realism. The necessity of keeping within the bounds of natural figuration, of selecting realistic color schemes and line compositions, though offering worlds of design possibilities, has been just as hampering as confinement to symbolic representation on the Indian's part. The Indians have been successful in symbolism, for they are allowed an interplay of motif and were not subjected to positive forms. Though the Thunder-bird is conceived within certain general lines, every representation of it shows variations; also in the complicated symbolical compositions, details could be shifted about to some degree (except in ceremonies like the sand painting in the Kiva). If one's language of signs is voluminous enough, there is as much play for the artist in symbolism as in realistic borrowings. In either art mode, discrimination and innate sense of decorativeness can counterbalance the limitations of style technique.

The interplay of the material world, symbolism, and a strong decorative impulse have given their arts a superb character and great sustaining force. The world of nature has joined with man's spiritual context to create the art form. Strangely enough Indian art dwells on symmetry, proportioning, and harmony of line and color. The uncertainties inherent in Southwestern climate, the overpowering juggling of nature apparently reacted on the Indian and made him crave exactitude



*Furniture, Spanish Colonial — Blanket and Pottery, Indian*

*Courtesy of Frank G. Applegate*



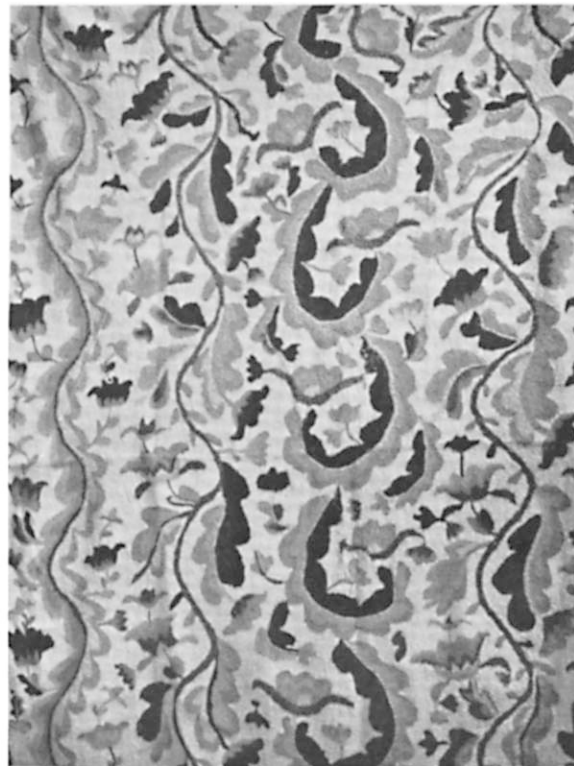
*Courtesy of Frank G. Applegate*  
 Blanket of vegetable dyed handspun wools — Spanish Colonial

in his arts. Indian symbolism is constructed like the blazed trail of the woodsman; in blazing a trail one always makes certain that the oncoming blaze is within the line of vision at any one mark. Ignorant of this fact, the tenderfoot may find himself lost in a maze but the experienced woodsman can move onwards without hesitating. So with Indian art, to the inexperienced it may seem strange and devoid of thought structure, to the Indian, however, every line has its meaning and he follows it through from motif to motif, reconstructing the story as portrayed in the symbolism.

Through the interplay of various factors, the Pueblo Indians developed extensively but a few arts. The Southwest is poor in many natural resources, the Indians were virtually on the bare subsistence level as a consequence. Because of the lack of metals and wood, their civilization could not advance to any great heights and also they were

precluded from the practice of many arts. The incursions of wandering and fiercely depredating tribes, like the Apache and Comanche, proved great handicaps for their flocks of sheep and crops were often taken in raids and the resulting insecurity prevented them from improving their lot in a more permanent way.

In the manual arts, the Indians were proficient in home building, developing what may be called "adobe architecture" which not only in style but also in construction method is the cheapest and most satisfactory for Southwestern conditions; weaving, basketry, and pottery. Besides these manual arts they have displayed ability in music, the dance, ceremonial arrangement, the drama, and correlated arts like sand painting. Since the advent of the Spanish and the permeation of American culture, various other arts have come to the front — included amongst these are silver work, gesso painting, and wood working. The Pueblo Indians evince a receptive mind and, though fostering few arts for their own needs, they have shown remarkable ingenuity in assimilating the ideas of others and have been responsive towards suggestion. Mary R. Roberts relates a story that reveals their propensities for improvement; it is as follows — "Dr. Edgar L. Hewett, of the American School of Research, while excavating the Pajarito Plateau



*Courtesy of Frank G. Applegate*  
 Colored Wool Embroidery on Handspun Wool Colcha — Spanish Colonial

at Puye, employed the Indians of San Ildefonso. They became greatly interested in the artifacts found in the ruins, discussing them with the scientists and comparing them with their own products. Dr. Hewett suggested to the women that they try to make pottery as fine as the ancient pieces they had discovered. In spite of the lack at that time of a profitable market for better wares, they gradually perfected the polychrome and black styles which they were making."

The Pueblos have always shown great originality



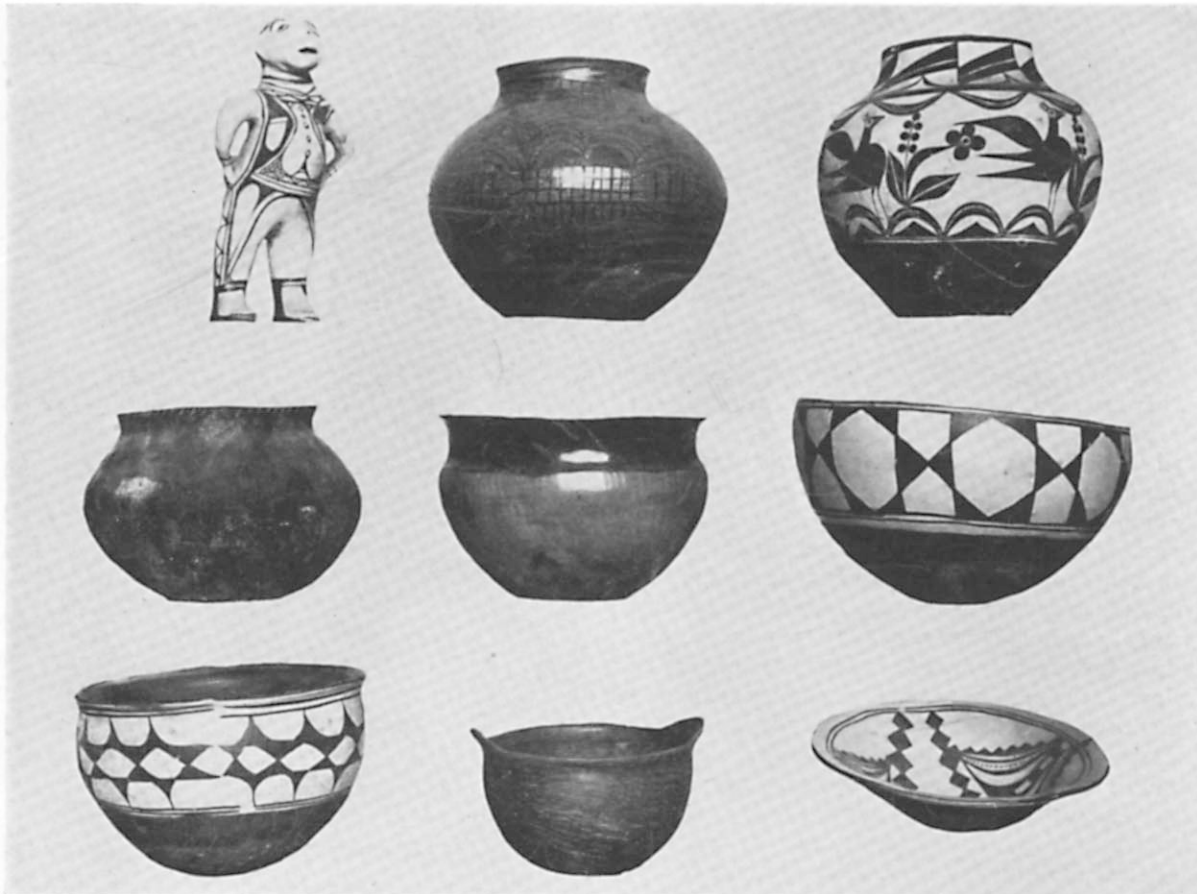
*Courtesy of The American Heye Foundation*

*Indian Baskets*

in design; it is common knowledge that most Indian craftsmen will not repeat any pattern no matter what inducements are offered by the trader or collector. Though working without drafts and though arranging motifs through memory or imagination, they

are able to execute complicated designs, carry out the details perfectly, and improvise perpetually. It is this trait which enables the Indian to live his art. Every piece is a new problem and neither his hand nor his brain are mechanized.

*(To be continued in next issue)*



*Courtesy of The American India Heye Foundation*

*Indian Pottery*