

Episode 23: Works Progress Administration and New Mexico



Chest, ca. 1920s
Artist Unknown, United States
Wood and metal
Taylor Collection, Mesilla, NM



Colcha curtain
Artist Unknown, United States
Cotton
Taylor Collection, Mesilla, NM



Mirror, ca. 1930s
Francisco Delgado, United States
Wood and metal
Taylor Collection, Mesilla, NM

Photo by New Mexico Historic Sites

English Transcript: Over the course of this series, you have heard me reference the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and typically the world "revival" that has sometimes been referenced alongside it. The Works Progress Administration helped New Mexico during one of the country's biggest economic hardships but what did it do for art? How did this program ensure the future conservation of some of New Mexico's most recognizable art styles?

The Works Progress Administration program was created in 1933 by President Franklin Roosevelt as a response to the Great Depression. As part of the New Deal, the WPA was essential in providing employment to people who in turn worked on projects throughout the country including constructing highways, building schools, and working on public works of art. At its peak, over 10,000 artists were employed throughout the country with New Mexico being one of the WPA's most active states.

By the time the program reached its second year, more than half of New Mexico's population had some form of involvement with the WPA. The Federal Art Project, which oversaw the art component of the WPA, worked with artists throughout the country. Those artists and craftsmen were tasked to create quality pieces of furniture and art or teach these skills. In total, twenty-nine communities within the state had artists creating works. What set New Mexico artists apart was where they drew their inspiration. Many of the works were influenced by the Spanish Colonial Era (1598-1821), creating a revival period for several styles of art. Examples of this included furniture, embroidery, and folk art. Additionally, the WPA sponsored and supported many Native American arts. While this program allowed for Hispanic and Native American artists to showcase their skills and produce exceptional creations, they received little to no recognition at that time, and it was not uncommon for these tradesmen to not sign their work.

Exploring the Collections

TAYLOR-MESILLA HISTORIC PROPERTY

Made of sturdy and quality wood, having carved details, and using various stains were all characteristics of New Mexican WPA-era furniture. Prior to the Great Depression, colonial-style furniture was popular in the tourist market. Because of this interest, vocational programs were created to teach this skill. Experienced carpenters taught people not only how to make quality furniture but also how to incorporate details like the cockleshells and step patterns to decorate these pieces. The *Spanish Colonial Furniture Bulletin* was used in these vocational schools. Nicknamed "blue books" because of their blue covers, these books contained images and information on Spanish Colonial, Spanish, and Mexican style furniture. This ensured that the furniture produced by carpenters remained authentic to the original designs. Since these pieces were used on a day-to-day basis many do not exist today. However, some can be found in museums and private collections. The chest in the photo, which dates to the 1930s was made in New Mexico. If you look at the front of the chest you will see a diamond pattern, which was typical during the WPA era. The chest was purchased from a shop in Albuquerque by Mr. Taylor, using his and the late Mary Daniels Taylor wedding money. It is currently displayed in the Small Zagan.

The popular needlework style known as *colcha* embroidery was first introduced to New Mexico after the arrival of the Spanish. *Colcha*, which translates to bedcover, was popular between the 1700s and 1800s. This style of needlework was first used to mend holes and tears on bedcovers but eventually evolved to an art form that was used to decorate cloth. Each thread was meticulously spun and made of wool from the churro sheep. Colored threads were created using local pigments, imported dyes like indigo, and cochineal (crushed bugs that create a red dye). Using these threads, the needlework was done on *sabanilla*, a piece of loosely woven wool fabric, and motifs like birds and flowers were common designs. The stitch itself is known as a self-couching stitch, meaning the threads are laid across the front of the *sabanilla* and then additional stitches are added to secure that thread. Rather than having a full mirrored image of the design on the back of the *sabanilla* only part of the stitch is visible, resulting in less thread being used. Other textiles like alter cloths and runners were also made using this stitch. However, with industrialization, *colcha* embroidery nearly became obsolete, as manufactured textiles were created in larger quantities and with a faster production time.

The founding of the Spanish Market in the 1920s brought *colcha* embroidery back to life. As there were only a few who still remembered how to do this art, they were encouraged to create their works and display them at the market. Like other New Mexican art, the tourist market embraced *colcha* embroidery. Unfortunately, with the passing of its founders and the Great Depression, the market disbanded and *colcha* embroidery went with it. Eventually, a second revival came with the WPA. Estella Garcia began teaching *colcha* embroidery in Melrose, New Mexico at the Fine Arts Center. There, she taught women *colcha* embroidery. Their works were found in government buildings throughout the state as curtains and seat cushions. Due to the beauty of this work, *colcha* embroidery was selected to be part of the national New Deal art exhibits where people across the nation could admire this traditional New Mexican art form. While Garcia is remembered for her work, the names of her students were never documented. *Colcha* saw a third revival in the 1970s and with the reestablishment of the Spanish Market, *colcha* embroidery has been active ever since. The curtain in the photo was gifted to Mr. Taylor by his cousin Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert. While the creation date is unknown, this curtain is a great example of how *colcha* embroidery looks.

Tinsmiths during the WPA were given the opportunity to teach others their trade. One of those tinsmiths was Francisco Delgado, the artist of the mirror in the photo. As mentioned in episode 22, tin was not always accessible in New Mexico and unlike the decline *colcha* embroidery faced with the introduction of industrialization, tin art

Exploring the Collections

TAYLOR-MESILLA HISTORIC PROPERTY

When Delgado was in the United States, he learned the art of tin smithing from a Mexican immigrant. He learned to work with tin, and he learned to incorporate the designs of the Mexican people into his work. For Delgado, he was able to teach others this skill, and in turn the works produced were used as decorative accessories in buildings. The Albuquerque Little Theater, for example, has Delgado made light fixtures.

The Works Progress Administration not only helped New Mexicans during the Great Depression, but it also allowed for art to survive. The program allowed for the artistry and vocational skills to be taught and passed down generation to generation. Additional revival phases of these arts brought renewed interest to these creations and with the reintroduction of the Spanish Market, these artists who create furniture, *colcha* embroidery, and tin works are finally able to get their credit and recognition for keeping part of New Mexico's cultural identity alive and thriving.

To learn more about certain objects in the collection and their ties to the WPA see Episode 7(WPA Chairs), Episode 20 (Straw Art), and Episode 22 (New Mexico and Tin).

Traducción en Español: Algunas de las mejores ideas han venido de los sueños. La canción *Yesterday* de Los Beatles, las máquinas de coser, e incluso la tabla periódica han comenzado en el mundo de los sueños de sus creadores. Estas creaciones subconscientes han impactado al mundo de diferentes maneras y el significado cultural del alebrije Mexicano no es diferente.

Tómate un momento para estudiar las fotos. Ves una zebra, pero ¿por qué se ve diferente? Las alas y los colores no son normales pero ¿por qué este animal tiene partes adicionales? Bueno, ¡comenzó con un sueño! El artista Mexicano Pedro Linares, era conocido por sus obras de papel maché. Como cartonero, Linares solía crear arte popular Mexicano, como piñatas y otras pequeñas figuritas, que vendía en la Ciudad de México. A la edad de 30 años, Pedro se puso muy enfermo. Incapaz de visitar a su médico, se vio obligado a recuperarse en casa y pronto cayó inconsciente. Aún estando inconsciente tuvo un sueño vívido de criaturas que nunca había visto que habían formado ante él. Más tarde recordaría que las criaturas parecían casi mitológicas, con rasgos familiares pero en colores salvajes y con partes desiguales. ¡Describió mulas con alas de libélulas y gallos con astas! En un momento de su sueño, Linares describió a las criaturas cantando ¡Alebrije! Alebrije! Alebrije!" Esto asustó a Pedro y lo hizo despertar de su sueño febril.

Cuando despertó, descubrió que se había recuperado de su enfermedad y comenzó a recrear las criaturas que vio en su sueño. Los alebrijes, así los nombro el por el canto que escuchó en sus sueños, fueron hechos primero de papel maché. Eran grandes, audaces en color, y extraños, sin embargo, eso no disuadió a las personas de comprarlos. Estas figuras únicas se hicieron muy populares y pronto artistas Mexicanos como Frida Kahlo y Diego Rivera encargaron el trabajo de Linares y a mediados de la década de 1940, los alebrijes se convirtieron en un elemento básico en el arte popular Mexicano. En 1975, Linares apareció en el documental de Judith Bronowski, *Artesanos Mexicanos*. Esta película catapultó la carrera

Exploring the Collections

TAYLOR-MESILLA HISTORIC PROPERTY

internacional de Linares, que introdujo las coloridas creaciones de Pedro a todo el mundo. Por su trabajo, Linares fue galardonado con el Premio Nacional Mexicano de Arte Popular y Tradiciones en 1990, uno de los más altos honores del país en las artes.

Después de la Revolución Mexicana (1920), hubo un cambio en los ideales artísticos. En lugar de crear artes en un estilo Europeo, los intelectuales y políticos presionaron por una estética más tradicional centrada en México con la Esperanza de unificar un país devastador por la guerra. Abarcando las artes indígenas y populares creadas en todo México, la producción de estos estilos artísticos creció gracias a las exhibiciones patrocinadas y los alebrijes fueron parte de este movimiento 20 años después. Con los años ocurrió un cambio artístico en el estado de Oaxaca después de que Linares se mudó allí y mostró a los artistas locales que trabajaban con madera, cómo crear los alebrijes.

Apreciado por la talla de madera tradicional que se remonta a la cultura Zapoteca, los talladores de madera de Oaxaca adoptaron este nuevo estilo de arte. A Manuel Jiménez se le puede atribuir ser la primera persona en crear un alebrije hecho de madera, específicamente madera de copal. Él combinó la visión de Linares con las técnicas tradicionales de tallado de la región. Con el tiempo otros talladores de madera comenzaron a hacer alebrijes. La madera del copal femenino se utiliza ya que es más fácil de tallar. Los niños tradicionalmente recolectaban la madera, mientras que los hombres tallaban las figuras y las mujeres las pintaban. El proceso de tallado puede tardar hasta un mes en completarse y se utilizan herramientas como cinceles y cuchillos. Una vez tallada, la madera se deja secar. Dependiendo del tamaño, el proceso de secado puede tardar hasta 10 meses. Mientras la madera se seca, pueden ocurrir grietas, pero los métodos de reparación son simples como por ejemplo el uso de cuñas de madera y una mezcla de aserrín y pegamento ayudan a reparar estas grietas. La pintura que da vida a los alebrijes estaba hecha tradicionalmente de tintes naturales, sin embargo, con el tiempo comenzaron a desvanecerse, así que en las piezas más contemporáneas, se utiliza pintura a base de látex. ¡Los descendientes de Linares y Jiménez todavía crean alebrijes hasta el día de hoy!

Los alebrijes se han convertido en sinónimo de México durante casi 80 años. Se celebran desde 2007 en la Ciudad de México durante el Desfile de Alebrijes Monumentales. Este desfile honra el arte popular de México, donde cientos de alebrijes participan en el desfile que fueron creados a mano por miles de participantes. ¡Los alebrijes de papel maché a veces pueden medir hasta 13 pies (casi 4 metros) de altura! Para muchos, los alebrijes también se pueden incluir en los altares hechos por familias mientras celebran el Día de los Muertos. Internacionalmente, se han realizado exposiciones con alebrijes en Polonia, Canadá, Inglaterra, y los Estados Unidos. ¡Y en 2019 México oficialmente nombro los alebrijes como parte de su patrimonio cultural!

Exploring the Collections

TAYLOR-MESILLA HISTORIC PROPERTY

Los sueños a veces nos llevan a mundos desconocidos. ¡Saber que lo que una vez fue un sueño se convirtió en un fenómeno cultural para México, te hace preguntarte de qué son capaces de crear tus sueños!