

NATIVITY SCENES RICH IN TRADITION, SPIRITUALITY AND EMOTION

BY SARA FORD

The celebration of Christmas in Northern New Mexico is a carol sung in many voices, a harmonious blend of cultural diversity and traditions, creating rich and varied verses that strengthen and sweeten a simple melody, one which celebrates peace on earth and goodwill toward men. Nativity scenes, crafted by three area artists, are testaments to this strong song. Each scene is rich in tradition, spirituality and emotion.

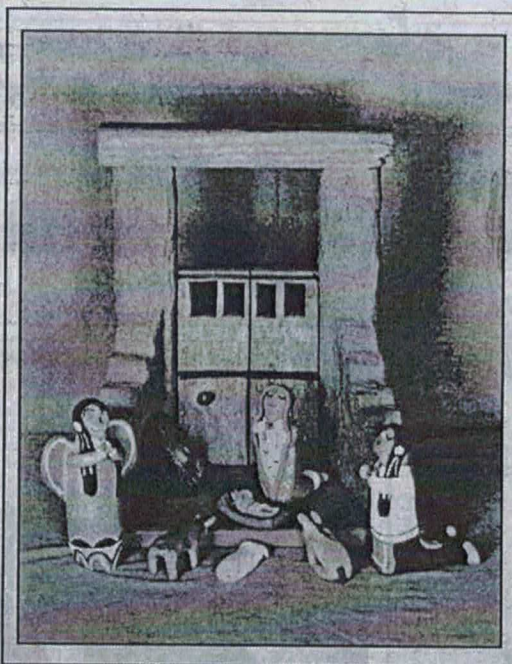
Juanita Martinez, whose Nativity scene is featured on the cover, learned to make pottery as a small child on the Jemez Pueblo. "I used to watch my mother make pottery. She always worked with Jemez clay," Martinez recalls. "I used to make little pinch pottery and ask my mother to sell it for me. And they sold."

Martinez, who married a man from Taos Pueblo, and uses both Jemez and micaceous clay now, learned to be thankful when acquiring raw materials. "When we get our clay, we have to pray before we take it," Martinez explains. Corn meal is used in the ceremony and the prayer is said before any digging takes place.

The Christmas celebration on the Jemez Pueblo, begins Christmas Eve and ends January 6, according to Martinez. "One family volunteers to have the baby Jesus. They fix up their house and invite the whole Pueblo to celebrate," she says. "The couple that volunteers sits at a shrine all that time. Everyone prays and eats at the shrine." Afterward, they watch dances, the buffalo dance and the deer dance, and return to eat again.

These traditions are vital to Martinez. "I think about our way of celebrating Christmas and I make my Nativity pieces the Indian way, dressed in Indian costumes," she says. "It is preserving a tradition."

When she makes her Nativity scenes, Martinez is careful to keep another Jemez tradition. "I talk to my clay. I say I hope you make your new family happy wherever you go," she says. "I hope your new people will



NATIVITY SET BY JUANITA MARTINEZ



JUANITA MARTINEZ, TAOS PUEBLO

think of our Indian ways and that you will give them blessings in their new year."

Margaret Mirabal, of Taos Pueblo, learned how to make pottery from her grandmother. "She showed me how to mix the micaceous clay from the mountains," Mirabal says. "Then she showed me how to make a bowl."

Mirabal also learned that when she



MARGARET MIRABAL, TAOS PUEBLO

took the clay from the mountains she must say a prayer. "We ask the Great Spirit to help us build what we are going to create from the clay," she explains. "It is a tradition of all Indians from various tribes."

Before she begins to create, Mirabal lets an idea or an image fill her mind. "I pray before I begin the work and that helps me form what I'm going to make," she says. "As I see the image develop, I know that the work will be good."

The celebration of Christmas at the Pueblo is important to Mirabal. The Nativity scene in the church allows people to worship the baby

Jesus, she says. "This reminds people of happiness and peace. They devote a lot of prayer to Him for their loved ones."

The bonfires provide an opportunity to meet old friends and make new friends. "There

is laughter and much joy. So

many people come to Taos Pueblo for the peace that is there at Christmas," Mirabal says.

Creating Nativity scenes provides enormous satisfaction. "It demonstrates the whole idea of Christmas," Mirabal says. "It brings people together."

Juan Sandoval describes himself as a humble artist. "In my work every-

thing starts with spirituality. My pieces are simple and they have one gift," he says. "They make people laugh. I thank God for giving me the gift to make people happy."

Sandoval, who was born in Dixon, grew up in Northern New Mexico, where he absorbed the traditions of his native land and its diverse people. The roots of his clay figures, storytellers and those in Nativity scenes, stretch back to the Anasazi in prehistoric times, when figures were shaped to depict themselves and their Gods.

The artist, quite a storyteller himself, often answers questions with amusing anecdotes. Asked where he developed the signature smile on his clay pieces, he quickly recounts a story. "Some years ago, my daughter, who was six at the time, told me my pieces were not smiling. She was persistent, so I changed the shape of the mouth," Sandoval recalls. "By accident, the piece went to the Museum of New



JUAN SANDOVAL

Mexico. The buyer called and said don't change a thing. That smile is going to become your signature."

It has become far more. Many medical professionals buy Sandoval's pieces to cheer up patients, some of whom have put them by their beds as an antidote to intense treatments or therapies. To the artist, that is a reward worth far more than gold. "When you smile and when you laugh that is the real you," Sandoval explains. "It is a moment in your life when all those walls that you erect to protect you against the outside world fall. For one instant, the innocence that you have comes out. We all have it even though we bury it."

Juanita Martinez exhibits her work at the Carson House Shop, 117 Kit Carson Road, Taos, 758-0113 and at Village Gifts, Taos Pueblo.

Margaret Mirabal exhibits her work at the Carson House Shop, 117 Kit Carson Road, Taos, 758-0113 and by appointment at her studio on Taos Pueblo, 751-1027.

Juan Sandoval exhibits his work at Bryan's Gallery, 121 Kit Carson Road, Taos, 758-9407.