

MISSIVES OF THE ART WORLD//JULY 19, 2015

Photography @ The Spanish Colonial Museum

Last year we went to a benefit for the Spanish Market in Santa Fe and as is often the case they were holding a benefit auction. One of my favorite photographers is Ansel Adams and one of my favorite photographs by him is his [Ranchos de Taos Church](#). It has been photographed often but as far as I was concerned only one was successful and that was by Adams.

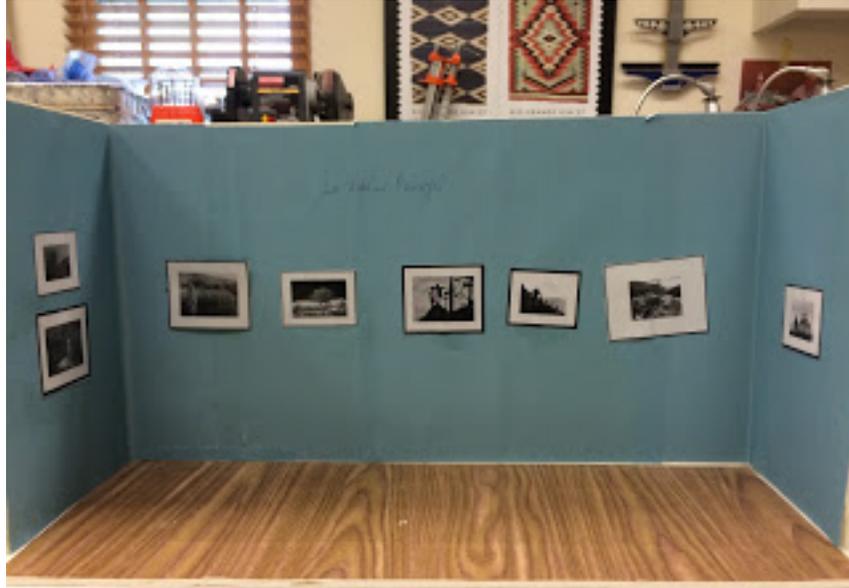
Then at this auction I saw another. It shows the Ranchos de Taos with birds flying off and landing on it. It is not a want-to-be Adams but an original vision of the church called "Flight of the Angels, St. Francis of Assisi Church, Ranchos de Taos, New Mexico" 2014. I bought it at the auction and I saw another print of the image recently at the Museum of Spanish Colonial Art. Anne and Bill Frej (pronounced Fray) are very passionate collectors in several areas but particularly photography and Bill Frej is the extremely talented photographer who took that photo.



The show mentioned above is 80 years of black and white photography from New Mexico and Mexico and features works from the Frej collection. The idea for the show was Anne and Bill's because they saw the perfect fit between their collection and the Museum on whose board he now serves. Also, it can introduce the field of Spanish Colonial Art to a broader audience interested in photography.

During the 16th century Spain conquered much of South America, all of Mexico and parts of the United States. Spanish Colonial Art is derived from Spanish art combined with the indigenous styles of its colonies and they naturally developed their own style within the Spanish vernacular. For someone, such as myself, where Spanish Colonial Bultos (painted wooden sculptures representing images of Christian Iconography) and Retablos (devotional paintings) are completely unfamiliar, photography becomes a natural bridge to the Spanish Colonial world.

An idea, however, is not enough, every exhibition needs a lot of planning after the images have been chosen. The Frejs came up with the title, "Tradición, Devoción y Vida"; the director of the museum, David Setford, selected the works from their collection, amplified by loans from the New Mexico Museum of Art and the artists themselves for the various sections; and Reine Mouré, a volunteer at the Spanish Colonial, did the installation. If you just start putting works of art up on the wall you will end up with extras that don't fit or a huge gap so you first need to make models. Here is one that Reine prepared before starting to tack images to the wall.



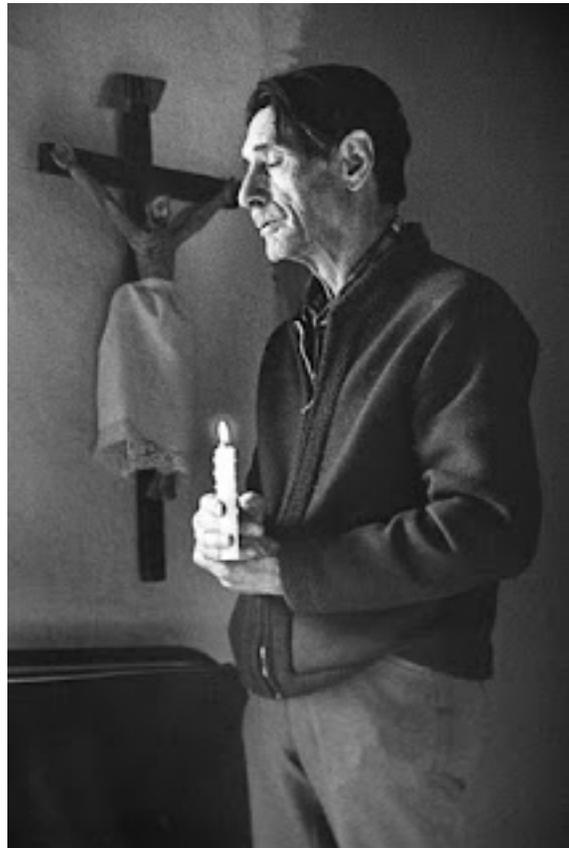
Just as European Old Master art is predominantly religious, Devotion overlaps the categories of Tradition and Life in this photography exhibition. To mention just a few of my favorites among the almost 70 works, I will start with another photograph by Bill Frej. This one is the cover of the catalog and is called, “Calvary Hill, The Road from Chimayo”, 2014. This image shows a Cross overlooking the valley and the sculpture of an angel admiring the vast New Mexico landscape. It captures New Mexico in a way that is not easy to do.



Continuing on a theme is “Praying to Mixe God, Oaxaca, Mexico”, 1980 by Sebastião Salgado (1944-), a Brazilian social documentary photographer. It reminds me so much of my favorite 19th century German artist, Caspar David Friedrich. Look at this image for instance, “[Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog](#)”, circa 1818 from the Hamburg Kunsthalle with the added element of the religious crosses echoed in the landscape.



The most moving image in the category of devotion is the “Penitente Services during Holy Week”, 1987 by Nancy Hunter Warren. Penitentes are members of a lay brotherhood who practice self-flagellation. The ancient rite remained strong in rural New Mexico. The artist, though elderly, attended the opening and talked to all comers. Quite a number of books of her work have been published with images of Native Americans and Hispanic Villages of New Mexico. In fact, throughout the exhibition were separate cases near the images with books turned to the page of the image that you are looking at. It is an innovative touch, which makes sense and adds an imprimatur for an unfamiliar field.



“Devoción de Mano Lupe Tomé, New Mexico” 1989 was lent by the artist Miguel Gandert. Born in Española, New Mexico in 1956, a descendant of Spanish settlers of Mora, New Mexico and Antonito, Colorado. Gandert is a professor at the University of New Mexico. Beaumont Newhall (1908-1993), the Museum of Modern Art’s first photography curator who was the first to see photography not from a technical point of view but an art historical one, taught at UNM and was instrumental in developing the university’s stellar collection of over 10,000 photographic images.



In the section of the exhibition that focuses on daily life the Mexican photographer Humberto Suaste, (1954-) translates the title of his photograph “Recuerdos”, 1970s as Remembrance. The word in context can also mean to “take this as a keepsake”. The figure leaning out of the window of the train looks wistful; is it a good memory?-- maybe he is thinking of family left behind.



As you have heard this is the “Summer of Color” in Santa Fe. Museums and exhibition spaces have picked various colors and Spanish Colonial’ Museum’s official Color exhibition is “Blue on Blue: Indigo and

Cobalt in New Spain”, including bultos, retablos and textiles. It seems fitting to me that Santa Fe should have a Black & White show as well.

All the photographs are from the collection of Anne and Bill Frej unless otherwise noted and I thank them for sending me the images for this Missive.