



OWINGS-DEWEY FINE ART
SANTA FE NEW MEXICO

PATROCINO BARELA



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Mildred Tolbert

Barela was a wood sculptor who turned out a prodigious body of work in his short lifetime (1908-1964). No doubt making these beautiful objects was his greatest pleasure; they expressed his philosophy and aspects of his culture. His work seems hard for critics, curators and scholars to categorize. He has been described as a “primitive, a modern, a santero, an ‘outsider artist,’ his carvings compared to Meso-American, South Pacific, 11th century Romanesque, Byzantine, Renaissance, even German Expressionist.” But no one questions the beauty and power of their lines and mass, or the aesthetic pleasure they evoke.

Although he was not a church member, he was religious and employed many biblical stories and figures in his work. His art also seemingly expressed endless aspects of human life and consciousness. Barela employed metaphor in his speech as well as in his art. For example, in an interview with Kit Egri, Barela replied in a metaphorical manner:

“You know Vernon Hunter? (director of Taos WPA arts project) He ask me many questions once. ‘Where did you learn to carve? The artists in Santa Fe do not believe you did it without learning. How did your father learn to be a wild weed doctor?’ he ask me. I tell him the life for a person

in this world. How am I going to tell him? I learned going up the hill and coming down the hill. I learn in hard times and good times. I make a carving to tell him....”

Differing from the *santero* tradition from which it evolved, his work is secular in its expressions of universal aspects of humanity – grief, love, jealousy, etc. The style is unmistakable and not easily copied. They are most often described as undulating.

Even though Barela could not read or write and spent most of his working life as an itinerant laborer (a shepherd, in mines and on farms), he had a period of fame when rave reviews about his work appeared in *Life Magazine*, *Time* and *The New York Times*. This was during the Great Depression – 1936 – when he was working in the Taos Work Projects Administration program. Eight of his pieces were selected for an exhibition of WPA art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (“New Horizons in American Art,” 1936) and Barela’s work was singled out for great acclaim. A commercial gallery wanted to represent and promote his work, but the New Mexico WPA directors did not allow it.

After the WPA Art project ended, he peddled his work around town for a few dollars or a bottle of wine. In the 1950s, two galleries, the Blue Door and *La Galeria Escondida*, showed a few of his pieces, but not understanding the gallery system, Barela preferred his own method of dealing for instant cash.

Since Barela’s death in 1964, by fire in his ramshackle studio on the outskirts of Taos, his life has taken on a legendary quality. There have been numerous magazine articles, reviews, major exhibitions and a definitive book about him, *The Spirit Ascendant: The Life and World of Patrocino Barela* by David Witt, a curator, and Edward Gonzales, an artist.

His early life certainly adds to the legend. His parents had come from northern Mexico to Bisbee, Arizona, where Barela was born. His mother and sister died soon afterward and Barela spent his childhood wandering the desert with his father and brother gathering pharmaceuticals, as his father was a curandero or “doctor of wild weeds,” as Barela later described him. When Barela was 15, he and his brother were left to their own devices and he began his work as an itinerant laborer, eventually settling in Taos. There he married a woman with four children and they later had three of their own.

During those years in Taos, he grew as an artist. It began after he mended a *santo*; he became very engaged with the problem and figured out a way to mend the wood sculpture very efficiently. He began to carve figures, describing his method later to Kit Egri in a memorable interview: “More easy now than six or eight years ago. I measure with fingers, look around the piece of wood, get a little saw, get the chunks. The idea depend on the piece. When I get the piece I decide what I can do.”

I first heard about Barela when I came to live in Taos in 1938. I went away during World War II, then returned and heard even more about him: how a number of people around town were collecting his work, and I saw them displayed at the Harwood Library and at the Taos Inn. My husband, Judson Crews, and I were given one; we purchased another from Barela, and I very much enjoyed having them about.

In 1955 my husband, our friend Wendell Anderson, both poets, and I produced a book about Barela’s art that was designed by Crews, a printer by trade. The book, *Patrocino Barela: Taos Wood Carver*, was illustrated with my photographs and includes Barela’s explanations of each sculpture. This modest book perhaps aroused broader interest in Barela because it subsequently went through two more editions and appeared in libraries and museum shops in the Southwest.

Barela’s settling in Taos was very fortunate; for here, he found help and encouragement from people who recognized his talent.

—*Ranchos de Taos, New Mexico*, 2006

Works Consulted

- Collins, Tom, “Taos Sculptor Defies Categories, Confounds Critics,” *Geronimo*, Taos, Feb. 1999.
Crews, Judson, Wendell Anderson and Mildred Tolbert, *Patrocino Barela: Taos Wood Carver*; Taos, 1955. Privately printed.
Gonzales, Edward and David Witt, *Spirit Ascendant: The Art and Life of Patrocino Barela*; Santa Fe, Red Crane, 1996.

PLATES



Untitled (*The Rabbit and The Snake*), Carved and fashioned wood, 56 x 9 x 5 1/2 inches



Untitled (*Burden of Years*), Carved and fashioned wood, 6 1/2 x 9 x 8 inches



Untitled (*Deer Dance*), Carved and fashioned wood, 25 x 14 x 7 1/4 inches



Untitled (*Anthropomorphic Form*), Carved and fashioned wood, 10 1/2 x 12 1/4 x 3 1/2 inches



Untitled (*Foot Totem*), Carved and fashioned wood, 29 x 10 x 3 inches



Untitled (*With Help from Above and Below*), circa 1950s, Carved and fashioned wood, 29 x 6 1/3 x 6 3/4 inches



Untitled (*Marriage*), circa 1950s, Carved and fashioned wood, 14 3/4 x 4 3/4 x 3 1/4 inches



Untitled (*Copulating Couple*), Carved and fashioned wood, 12 3/4 x 4 1/2 x 3 3/4 inches



Untitled (*Copulating Couple*), Carved and fashioned wood, 12 x 3 3/4 x 3 3/4 inches



Untitled (*Woman with Shawl*), Carved and fashioned wood, 15 x 6 x 9 inches



Untitled (*Quiet Man*), Carved and fashioned wood, 14 1/2 x 5 x 3 1/2 inches



Untitled (*Self-Portrait*), circa 1936, Carved and fashioned wood, 12 3/4 x 7 1/4 x 5 3/4 inches



Untitled (*Self-Portrait*), circa 1950s, Carved and fashioned wood, 16 x 4 x 3 inches



Untitled (*Nuestra Señora de los Rosarios*), Carved and fashioned wood, 15 1/2 x 5 x 4 1/2 inches (this page and opposite)





San Francisco de Asís, circa 1950, Carved and fashioned wood, 15 1/2 x 5 x 4 1/2 inches



Untitled (*San Cristobal*), Carved and fashioned wood, 17 1/2 x 6 x 6 1/2 inches, Private Collection, Arizona



Untitled (*Two Sides of Man, Double Sided*), Carved and fashioned wood, 16 1/2 x 5 x 6 inches



Untitled (*Man Walking*), Carved and fashioned wood, 11 1/4 x 8 x 3 inches



Untitled (*Magi*), Carved and fashioned wood, 22 x 4 x 4 1/2 inches



Untitled (*Santa Rosa*), circa 1950s, Carved and fashioned wood, 17 x 4 x 4 inches



Untitled (*Woman with Shawl*), Carved and fashioned wood, 22 x 3 3/4 x 6 inches



Untitled (*Woman with Rose, Santa Rosa*), Carved and fashioned wood, 12 1/2 x 5 x 3 inches



Untitled (*Village Life*), circa 1930s, Carved and fashioned wood, 16 1/2 x 9 x 7 1/3 inches (this page and opposite)





Untitled (*Man and Snake*), circa 1950, Carved and fashioned wood, 25 1/2 x 36 x 14 1/2 inches



Untitled (*Standing Man*), Carved and painted wood, 39 1/2 x 22 x 7 1/2 inches



Untitled (*Faces of Prayer*), Carved and fashioned wood, 12 x 5 x 3 inches



Untitled (*Praying Bishop*), Carved and fashioned wood, 12 1/4 x 5 1/4 x 2 1/2 inches



Untitled (*Faces of Man*), Carved and fashioned wood, 26 1/2 x 11 x 5 inches (this page and opposite)





Untitled (*Woman Praying*), Carved and fashioned wood, 12 1/4 x 5 x 4 1/2 inches



Untitled (*Silent Priest*), Carved and fashioned wood, 11 1/4 x 3 1/2 x 3 inches



Untitled (*Genuflecting Man with Candle*), Carved and fashioned wood, 19 1/2 x 4 x 4 1/2 inches



Untitled (*Prayer, Double Sided*), Carved and fashioned wood, 17 1/2 x 5 1/2 x 4 inches



Untitled (*Family Scene with Dog*), Carved and fashioned wood, 15 x 8 1/2 x 7 1/2 inches (this page and opposite)





Untitled (*Standing Man*), Carved and fashioned wood, 21 1/4 x 5 x 5 inches, Private Collection



Untitled (*Man with Beast*), Carved and fashioned wood, 16 x 5 1/2 x 5 1/4 inches



Untitled (*Woman and Man*), Carved and fashioned wood, 18 1/2 x 6 3/4 x 7 3/4 inches



Untitled (*A Dispute*), Carved and fashioned wood, 18 x 5 1/2 x 5 1/4 inches



Untitled (*Figure with Flames*), Carved and fashioned wood, 14 1/2 x 11 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches



Untitled (*Man and Demon in Flames*), Carved and fashioned wood, 17 x 8 x 6 inches



Untitled (*Nativity*), Carved and fashioned wood, 16 x 5 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches (this page and opposite)





Untitled (*Husband and Wife*), Carved and fashioned wood, 16 x 4 1/2 x 5 3/4 inches (this page and opposite)





Untitled (*Figure with Snakes*), Carved and fashioned wood, 13 1/2 x 18 x 15 1/2 inches



Untitled (*Mano de Dios*), Carved and fashioned wood, 14 x 2 3/4 x 1 1/3 inches



Untitled (*Angel Praying*), Carved and fashioned wood, 15 1/2 x 7 x 3 1/2 inches



Untitled (*Madonna Praying*), Carved and fashioned wood, 8 1/2 x 2 1/2 x 2 1/2 inches



Untitled (*Four Figures*), Carved and fashioned wood, 15 1/2 x 6 x 3 3/4 inches

PATROCINO BARELA

Born 1908
Died 1964

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

The Albuquerque Museum, Albuquerque, New Mexico
The Harwood Museum of Art, Taos, New Mexico
Millicent Rogers Museum, Taos, New Mexico
Kit Carson Historic Museums, Taos, New Mexico
Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico
Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York
Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California
National Hispanic Cultural Center, Albuquerque, New Mexico
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.
Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum, Canyon, Texas
Roswell Museum and Art Center, Roswell, New Mexico
The Taylor Museum, Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center,
Colorado Springs, Colorado
The University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson, Arizona

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

1999 *Barela: Redordando un Artista del Pueblo*
Millicent Rogers Museum, Taos, New Mexico

1997 *The Life and Art of Patrocino Barela*
The Albuquerque Museum, Albuquerque, New Mexico

1996 *Patrocino Barela*
Harwood Foundation Museum, Taos, New Mexico, Traveling Exhibition:
Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico, The Albuquerque Museum,
Albuquerque, New Mexico

1995 *The Human Figure in American Sculpture*
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Traveling Exhibition: Montgomery
Museum of Art, Montgomery, Alabama; Wichita Art Museum, Wichita,
Kansas; National Academy of Design, New York, New York

1994 *Crafting Devotion: Tradition in Contemporary New Mexico Santos*
Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum, Los Angeles, California

Hispano Woodcarving in the Southwest
National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.

1992 *500 Years of Hispanic Visual Arts*
Hispanic Culture Foundation, Albuquerque, New Mexico

1990 *Patrocino Barela*
The Albuquerque Museum, Albuquerque, New Mexico

1988 *Santos, Statues, Sculpture: Contemporary Woodcarving from New Mexico*
Craft and Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles, California, Traveling Exhibition:
Mexican Museum, San Francisco, California

1982 *Patrocino Barela*
Harwood Foundation Museum, Taos, New Mexico

1980 *Patrocino Barela*
Santuario de Guadalupe, Santa Fe, New Mexico

1974

Patrocino Barela
Museum of Albuquerque, Albuquerque, New Mexico

1972

Patrocino Barela
University of Albuquerque, Fine Arts Learning Center

1969

3 Cultures-3 Dimensions
Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico

1965

Patrocino Barela
Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico

1955

Craftsmen of New Mexico
Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico

1948

New Mexico State Fair Art Exhibition
Albuquerque, New Mexico

1940

Coronado Cuatro Centennial, 1540-1940
University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico

1939

Contemporary Art Exhibition
1939 World’s Fair, New York, New York

1936

Federal Art Project
National Museum, Washington, D.C.

New Horizons in American Art
Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York

New Mexico WPA Artists
Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe, New Mexico

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

1999

Tom Collins,“Taos Sculptor Defies Categories, Confounds Critics,”
Geronimo, Taos, February 1999.

1996

Carmella Padilla, “Patrociño Barela: Expressionist Carver,” *El Palacio*,
Winter-Spring issue.

Edward Gonzales and David Witt, *Spirit Ascendant: The Art and Life of Patrocino Barela*, Red Crane, Santa Fe.

1975

Russel Vernon Hunter, “Concerning Patrocino Barela” *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administration of the WPA Federal Art Project*, Edited by Francis C. O’Connor, New York Graphic Society, Boston.

1974

Leroy Perkins, “Barela Wood Sculptures: Reassuring Yet Disturbing,” *Albuquerque Journal*, September 5, 1974.

1963

Mildred Crews, “Sculptor in Wood,” *New Mexico Magazine*, March 1963.

1968

Mildred T. Crews, “Patrocino Barela: Woodcarver of Taos,” *Presbyterian Life Magazine*, February 16,1968.

1956

Lenore G. Marshall, “Patrocino Barela,” *Arts*, 1956.

1955

Judson Crews, Mildred Tolbert, and Wendell Anderson, *Patrocinio Barela: Taos Wood Carver*, Taos, 1955, Privately printed.

1952

Kelley Rae Hearn,“Patrocino Barela—Talented Wood Carver,” *El Crepúsculo*, July 24, 1952.

1950 Regina Cook, “Patrocino Barela—Woodcarver,” *El Crepúsculo*, April 13, 1950.

1936 “WPA Work Shown in Museum,” *El Palacio*, Vol. XL.

“Toward an American Art,” *The Nation*, October 10, 1936.

“Relief Work,” *Time*, September 21, 1936.

Edward Alden Jewell, “In the Realm of Art: Two Notable Early Shows,” *New York Times*, September 10, 1936.

“Woodcarvings of Former WPA Teamster Gain Attention,” *The Washington Post*.

“Art and Artists of New Mexico,” Ina Sizer Cassidy, *New Mexico Magazine*.

MILDRED TOLBERT

Writer and photographer Mildred Tolbert was born in 1919 and raised on a Texas Panhandle ranch near Pampa. At age twelve, she received her first Kodak Brownie Box camera, which was ordered from the Montgomery Ward catalogue. She enrolled in a photography course at Texas State College for Women (now, Texas Woman’s University) in 1936, and later studied journalism at West Texas State College at Canyon (now, West Texas A&M University).

In 1938, at age 19, Tolbert moved to Taos, New Mexico, and was hired by artist Martin Shaffer as a studio assistant. During World War II, Tolbert participated in a teacher-training program in photography at Lowry Field, near Denver, an important armament and technical training facility for the Army Air Corps. Afterwards, she relocated to New York City, where she worked as a printer at Leco Photo Service and as the (unofficial) photographer-in-residence for the arts journal *Iconograph*.

“Another misfit” drawn to “la vie bohème,” as she has described it, Tolbert returned to Taos in 1947, and began work as a freelance photographer. Throughout the 1950s, her photographs often appeared alongside her articles in *El Crepúsculo*, a precursor to the *Taos News*. Over the years, Tolbert has worked in a variety of photographic genres including: commercial photography (often documenting artworks for other artists), landscapes (of New Mexico, New York, and Zambia), and street photography. But, Mildred Tolbert is perhaps best known for her elegant and intimate portraits of such notable figures as: Gertrude Barrer, Dorothy Brett, Louise Bourgeois, John and Mary Collier, Robert Creeley, Andrew Dasburg, Beatrice Mandelman, Agnes Martin, and Doel Reed, among others. Tolbert’s extensive body of work aesthetically represents the creative spirit of place by documenting its physical beauty and the other “misfits,” including writers, artists, and actors, it attracted.

In 1955, Tolbert along with Judson Crews and Wendell B. Anderson first published their book *Patrocinio Barela: Taos Wood Carver*. In 1963, Tolbert released *A Pictorial Guide to Taos and Vicinity*. In 1969, at age 50, she received a B.A. degree in English from the University of Houston. Two collections of Mildred Tolbert’s writing, *Belmar and other Stories* and *Learning from Taos and Other Prose*, were published by Namaste Press in the 1980s.

Tolbert’s photographs have been exhibited in a variety of museums and galleries across the country, including, Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe, Shipley Gallery of American Art in Taos, Village Art Center in New York City, and Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut. Tolbert’s photographs are recognized for their aesthetic and historical significance, and, thus, there are two major archival repositories for her work: one, at the Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico, and, the second, at the Harwood Museum of Art in Taos. In 2005, Mildred Tolbert was honored by the Peter and Madeleine Martin Foundation for the Creative Arts with a Distinguished Career in Photography Award.

—C. Ondine Chavoya, *Santa Fe, New Mexico*, 2006

C. Ondine Chavoya is assistant professor of Contemporary Art and Latino Studies at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts. He is a 2005-2006 Research Fellow in American Modernism at the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum Research Center.

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PATROCINO BARELA

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Cover Photograph: Mildred Tolbert, *Patrocino*, c. 1940s,

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Foundation, Courtesy Harwood Museum of Art,

Taos, NM

Back Cover Photograph: Mildred Tolbert, *Patrocino at Work*, c. 1940s,

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