A Reassessment of New Mexican Spanish Colonial Furniture

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THE POPULARITY OF THE SANTA FE STYLE still influences modern perceptions of the character and style of Spanish colonial furniture in New Mexico. The origin of the style can be traced back to the turn of the century when newly-arrived Anglos first sought to interpret New Mexico's Spanish colonial past. Despite all evidence to the contrary, early New Mexican historians promoted a romantic myth of isolation which still encourages misconceptions about the quality and character of Hispanic woodworking in New Mexico. Although modern historians no longer believe that isolation caused a regression to medieval styles in New Mexican decorative arts, many people still expect Spanish colonial New Mexican furniture to be crudely constructed, often weathered, usually unpainted, and definitely unsophisticated, if not *retarditare*.

Research in Southwestern studies during the last ten years has challenged many of these outdated concepts of New Mexico's past, but popular perceptions of New Mexican Spanish colonial furniture have generally remained unchanged. Conservation research cannot take place in a cultural vacuum, and past perceptions, accurate or otherwise, still direct current research by influencing which materials are studied, and what questions are asked. Many currently accepted perceptions of New Mexican Spanish colonial furniture require reassessment in order to better understand cultural prejudices which may still influence modern attitudes towards this material.

The following paper is a preliminary report on recent research findings which support the ne-

Figure 1. Valdez chest, Harwood Foundation Museum of The University of New Mexico.

cessity for such a reassessment. Eleven pieces of New Mexican Spanish colonial furniture were sampled and many more pieces of furniture from seven collections were examined. Samples were prepared as cross sections, and analyzed using an ultraviolet microscope. Furniture sampled included pieces which had previously been sampled for pigment identification.[1] Pigment identifications were reinterpreted in relation to information derived from cross section analysis. Results to date are summarized below.

To a certain extent, most of the available literature on New Mexican furniture still tends to perpetuate outdated beliefs about the crudeness of Spanish colonial New Mexican furniture. Photographs and captions reinforce inaccurate expectations regarding the surface characteristics and construction details of Hispanic New Mexican furniture. Many of the photographs appear to have been lit and exposed to deliberately emphasize the rough, worn surfaces which are now so commonly found on New Mexican furniture. Black and white photographs often make rough surfaces appear even rougher. Close-ups of construction details often emphasize a certain crudeness which is thought to be characteristic of New Mexican woodworking.

Figure 2. Bottom front rail, Valdez chest

Valdez Chest

This carved chest *(fig. 1)* belongs to a group of approximately 20 similar chests thought to have been constructed by the Valdez family of woodworkers who worked in Velarde, New Mexico during the 19th century. The chest pictured is the one from which the Valdez attribution is derived. Its overall form and particular joinery techniques show characteristics of furniture from the northern Spanish provinces of Asturias and Navarra. The main difference in form is that the legs of this New Mexican chest were originally at least 18" longer than they are today (and probably closer to 22" longer, if we assume that the missing angled braces *(fig. 2)* did not intersect the legs at the floor).

The chest also originally had a small center drawer hung between the angled braces below the bottom rail. The cut off tenons for the drawer frame still reside in their mortises in the bottom rail.

New Mexican chests of this type are now commonly called *graneros* or *harineros*. Since they were built to store either grain or flour, the longer legs may have been a local design innovation to keep the contents away from floor level. The interior joints of this Valdez chest are caulked with scraps of cloth and sawdust, bound with an unidentified adhesive. New Mexican wills and inventories indicate that such chests were used in storerooms, also commonly called graneros, rather than within the formal living space. Graneros, therefore, must be understood as functional rather than decorative pieces of furniture, despite their modern popularity in Santa Fe living rooms.

Nevertheless, besides being sturdily built, this granero is well proportioned, competently constructed, and decorated with simple carving. It does not appear to have been built by an individual without training in basic woodworking techniques, but the details do not suggest formal training in the construction of fine furniture. Perhaps grain chests such as these were constructed by competent woodworkers who had not been trained as furniture makers. For instance, members of the *carpinteros de lo prieto* guild were the mechanics of their day,

Figure 3. Lock plate dated 1824, and escutcheon plate, Valdez chest

and they built functional wooden machinery. To become masters of their craft, they learned to build horse powered mills, oil mill and wine presses, water wheels, and mining machinery.[2] This chest exhibits techniques and construction characteristic of that type of functional object. The chest is clearly a simple piece of functional furniture rather than a fine example of the New Mexican decorative arts. It should not be studied as representative of the craft of furniture making in New Mexico, and it certainly does not represent the overall quality of the decorative arts in Spanish colonial New Mexico.

The history of this chest is enlightening. It is now owned by the Harwood Foundation Museum of the University of New Mexico in Taos. Bert Harwood, a turn of the century Taos school painter, acquired the chest around 1917. Museum records indicate that he purchased the chest from descendants of the man who built it. According to the family history, the chest was built by the grandfather of Juan de Jesus Valdez.[3] Census records confirm that Juan de Jesus Valdez was born in 1805. That would probably date the chest to the late 18th century. The lock plate is dated 1824, but it may be a later addition, as there is an escutcheon plate for a large key just to the proper right of the lock plate. *(fig. 3)*

In spite of its functional character, and use in a storeroom, the chest was finished with a brown semi-transparent glaze. Figure 4 shows the chest as it appears now, coated with a fairly glossy varnish and rather heavily waxed. Both of these coatings are probably of relatively recent origin and cover an earlier brown-colored varnish layer. The glossy varnish may have been applied at the

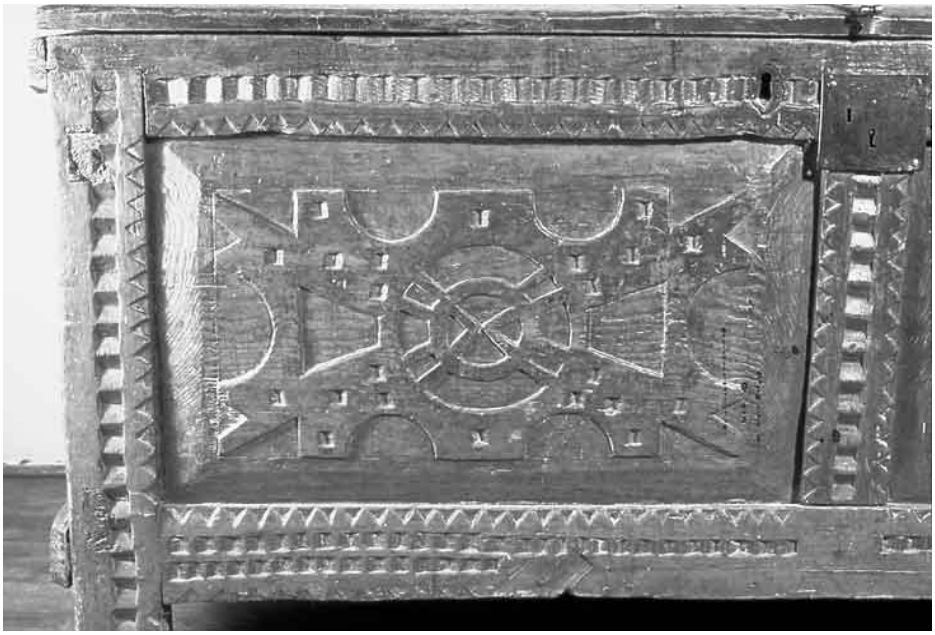

Figure 4. Panel, Valdez chest.

time that the chest made a transition from being a functional piece of storeroom furniture to a collectible antique.

Cross sections show that this brown coating contains red, yellow, black, and white pigment particles. The black pigment particles are charcoal. The other pigments have not yet been identified. The binder is also unidentified, but the yellow fluorescence is similar to that of two local pine resins. Work is in progress to identify these materials.

Both the character and the function of this coating are significant. The presence of a brown-colored varnish or glaze on a simple, functional piece of New Mexican furniture indicates that some New Mexican craftsmen used colored coatings to change the appearance of their pine furniture. New Mexican furniture makers used pine because there are no hardwoods generally available in New Mexico which are suitable for furniture construction. However, New Mexican *carpinteros* probably were not inventing a new style of unfinished or uncolored pine furniture, either out of necessity or preference, as has been assumed by various historians of New Mexican furniture. This brown coating may represent a deliberate attempt to disguise the color of newly cut pine without obscuring the grain of the wood. This technique would have been employed to create a piece of furniture similar in appearance to hardwood examples from northern Spain.

Martín Chest

The carved chest in this photograph *(fig. 5.)* is a more formal piece of furniture which is also believed to have been constructed in northern New Mexico. It is one of the few early pieces of New Mexican furniture which can be reliably dated, as the date is carved into the top front rail. The inscription on the rail states that the chest was made for don Manual Martín in 1823 or 1826. (Part of the last number is lost due to a break at the end of the rail.) The Martíns were a relatively wealthy trading family who lived in Taos and could well afford luxury goods such as painted chests.

Figure 5. Martín Chest, Harwood Foundation Museum of The University of New Mexico.

Figure 6. Detail, Martín chest, side panel.

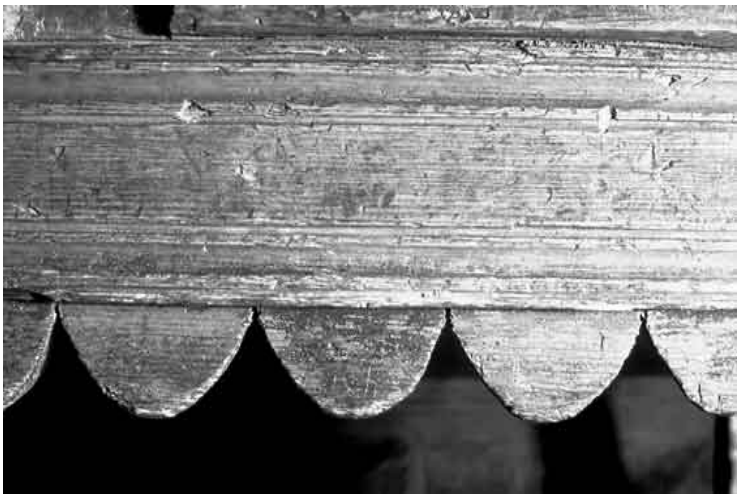

Figure 7. Bottom front rail, Martín chest.

The Martín chest now exhibits the dull brown appearance thought to be characteristic of New Mexican Spanish colonial furniture. When pictures of this chest were first published, the caption did not mention the painted surface, perhaps assuming that the remaining paint must have been a later addition.[4] *(fig. 6)*

However, in cross sections there is no evidence of an earlier layer of varnish or of dirt. Examination of the paint layers shows that the color scheme was bold, simple, and bright, with large and small alternating patterns of red and blue paint. *(fig. 7)*

Of particular importance are the individual pigments and the manner in which they were applied. The character of the red paint is different from that of most other red-painted New Mexican furniture. Although darkened with age, the red is still intensely red, almost a ruby color. Cross sections show that the colors were originally quite brilliant.

The pigment identifications for the Martín chest are by polarized light microscope.[5] The red pigment is vermillion. Earlier samples taken from this chest were identified as cinnabar, but this conclusion was based on measurement of the largest pigment particles. Gettens, Feller, and Chase have since asserted that vermillion prepared by the dry (sublimination) process cannot be distinguished from cinnabar on the basis of particle size, so the cinnabar identification is questionable.[6] The absence, in numerous samples, of any inclusionary particles characteristic of cinnabar suggests but does not prove that the vermillion pigment may be the product of a synthetic preparation.

Although the Romans mined cinnabar in Spain, by the early 17th century Spanish artists' treatises clearly state a preference for the synthetic product due to its superior handling. This preference further supports the possibility that the pigment may have been brought to New Mexico rather than mined locally. Although population and economic activity in New Mexico were growing at this time, it still seems more likely that a synthetic pigment would have been more efficiently manufactured elsewhere in New Spain or in Spain. References to stores of quicksilver have been found in a few early New Mexican inventories or wills because it was a used (sometimes illegally) to assay silver, but there are no known records which indicate that vermillion was manufactured from sulphur and mercury in New Mexico.

In cross sections taken from the Martín chest, the distance between the vermillion pigment particles and the ratio of pigment to binder indicate that the red coating was prepared as a glaze rather than as an opaque paint. The red glaze was applied over a relatively thick white ground layer of calcium sulfate.

The blue paint is Prussian blue, and it also functioned as a glaze. The pigment particles are closer together than in the vermillion glaze, but they are not as tightly packed as they would be in an opaque coating. The blue layer was applied more thinly, also on a relatively thick calcium sulphate ground. Some samples include a starch material which was previously identified as a component of the blue paint layer. This conclusion is incorrect, as a number of cross sections clearly show that the starch material is in the ground layer. It may have been added as an extender or binder. There is no evidence to suggest that Prussian blue pigment was manufactured in New Mexico at this time, so it is also more likely that the pigment was manufactured either elsewhere in New Spain or in Europe.

Vermillion and Prussian blue produce brilliant coatings, especially when applied as glazes over a white ground. The technique enhances the reflection of light through the glaze, and it was well known to artists and craftsmen throughout Europe and the New World for hundreds of years. Its use is described in many of the late 17th century English craft and painters' manuals. The technique has also been found on early 18th century painted furniture from Boston and the Connecticut River valley, where green glazes were applied over white lead grounds.[7]

It should not be surprising to find evidence of this relatively sophisticated artists technique on an early 19th century chest in Taos, New Mexico but it does raise questions about the commonly held belief that high-quality paint materials were unavailable in New Mexico. Obviously, the man who commissioned this chest desired bright colors, appreciated the superiority of expensive artists pigments, and was willing to pay the additional costs, not only of transportation and monopolistic trade practices, but also for the labor of a skilled craftsman trained in European painting techniques. This level of sophisticated taste should not be considered unusual for Taos, New Mexico, especially when an early will indicates that one 18th century resident of the villa had twenty-two gilded picture frames in her adobe home.

However, a red and blue glazed New Mexican carved chest does not fit well with theories of isolation and regression to brown, medieval furniture. The present appearance of this carved and painted chest shows more than simple wear and history of use. Museum records indicate that the chest was acquired by Burt Harwood in the early 1920's while he and his wife were renovating an historic adobe house in Taos. It was probably at that time that either the Harwoods or their antique dealer had the chest restored. The restorer repaired the broken groove in the top front rail, replaced the missing front section of the lid, and darkened the new pine used for the lid repair with a black glaze. Cross sections show that the black (green) glaze was applied to the rest of the chest as well, a trick commonly employed by restorers to help disguise recent repairs. This means that we were not just culturally handicapped when we first perceived this chest as typically dull and brown. The restorer and the collector expected and intended that the chest be seen that way.

In cross section, the dark varnish layer is visible above the Prussian blue layer. The pigment particles in the varnish are malachite, previously misidentified as a component of the blue paint layer. Their tiny size and uniform size distribution suggest a modern product, possibly prepared by chemical precipitation. Finely ground green pigments produce an excellent black glaze which can add to the general dullness of any colored surface, and this fact was well known to early 20th century restorers who favored the "Jacobean" look. This type of restoration aesthetic would produce a piece of furniture which would have been ideal for an Anglo-owned adobe home which was purchased and renovated for use as a an artist's salon in northern New Mexico.

The presently dull appearance of this once brilliantly colored piece of furniture conveys turn of the century Anglo expectations about New Mexican Hispanic culture. The commonly held belief has been that only "Mexicans" liked brightly colored furniture, as if to suggest that Hispanic New Mexicans were historically somehow different, more conservative perhaps, in

their decorative tastes. Ironically, the Taos resident who originally owned this chest was a citizen of Mexico when he commissioned the piece in the 1820's.

Consideration of the structure of this carved chest may also further our understanding of how cultural prejudices can still influence modern research. The chest has been described as "highly problematical" and "extensively altered,"[8] but examination of the interior surfaces under ultraviolet illumination shows that the structure of the chest has not been significantly altered. The front panel and top rail are not replacements as has been suggested, and the rosettes do not appear to have been added later. Only the front part of the lid has been replaced.

At the back rail, the original snipe hinges still attach the remaining section of the original lid. This detail is important because the construction of this chest has puzzled scholars, leaving some to assume that the rear top rail was never attached to the chest, "the maker evidently solely depending on gravity."[9] Such a solution would not have solved the problem of an unattached lid. Actually, the rail tenons were originally fastened in the stile mortises with wooden pins, probably hardwood. However, the pins were too thin, and were placed too close to the ends of straight-grained softwood tenons. The forces applied to the lid were greater than the shearing strength of the wood, and the tenons and mortises failed. This failure indicates a failed design which would have been adequate had the joints been executed in hardwood rather than pine.

This miscalculation of the mechanical properties of the materials employed does not indicate cabinetmaking of the highest quality, but neither is it incompetent, as the gravity theory suggests. Attention is drawn to this particular misunderstanding because it is typical of Anglo interpretation of Hispanic New Mexican material culture. All of us read this description for years without question. It did not seem atypical of the expected level of expertise of Hispanic New Mexican woodworkers, because it confirmed our shared but unexamined assumptions regarding Hispanic New Mexican woodworking. These expectations may simply be an inadvertent product of some pervasive 19th century Anglo cultural attitudes which still influence our understanding of early Hispanic New Mexican furniture.

Figure 8. Fragment, Valencia chest, Harwood Foundation Museum of The University of New Mexico.

Figure 9. Apodoca chest, collection of The Spanish Colonial Arts Society, Inc., at the Museum of International Folk Art

Summary

Modern opinions of Hispanic New Mexican material culture have been filtered through almost

two centuries of cultural misunderstanding and misinterpretation based on modern needs which are irrelevant to the original material. Lonn Taylor succinctly addressed this problem recently in a paper given to the New Mexico Historical Society, where he said:

> "part of the process of creating a comfortable relationship with an indigenous Hispanic culture that had been often described by Anglo-Americans as inferior and even 'mongrel' was to invent a romanticized past for that culture"[10]

That romanticized past of isolated consumers and semi-skilled woodworkers continues to subtly influence modern perceptions of Hispanic New Mexican material culture, especially its furniture.

This is why a reevaluation of modern opinions of New Mexican Spanish colonial furniture is overdue. Two case studies are hardly definitive, but in the past two years, numerous other examples of painted New Mexican furniture have been examined more closely than they had been in the past. Some are and were brown, but others were once brightly colored. Some were probably painted originally, while others may have been painted later.

For example, cross sections were taken from a three panel New Mexican chest *(fig. 8)* constructed in a style which has tentatively been attributed to Valencia county. Only the front panel of this particular chest has survived, and it was incorporated into a new and stylish piece of furniture. The original chest was painted in alternating designs of red and blue on the raised panels and the stiles and rails. Like the paint on the Martín chest, these paints were also applied over a white ground. Bright red paint layers have been found on alacena doors which are now painted brown.

Figure 10. Valdez Chest, collection of Dr. Ward Alan Minge.

Numerous and once brilliant layers of paint were found on an important piece furniture which was thought to have only one paint layer. Cross sections taken from the Apodoca chest *(fig. 9)* in the collection of the Spanish Colonial Arts Society show that the chest was repainted numerous times with alternating areas of red, orange, green and black designs. This chest may also have been coated with a deliberately opaque glaze, darkening colors which were originally much brighter.

Another small Valdez chest *(fig. 10)* was also found to have been painted red, although the red may not be the original layer. Cross sections from some carved New Mexican chests consistently contain yellow fluorescing finish material in the wood cells near the surface, but there's not enough material left on the surface to determine if the varnish once contained pigments, as the brown Valdez chest still does. Work is in progress by the author to analyze these cross sections and identify the materials.

Many New Mexican chests now retain no coatings at all (or at least they didn't until recent "restoration"), but their present appearance is sometimes suspiciously similar to that of furniture which has been stripped in a hot lye bath. Such pieces may have been stripped to meet 20th century expectations. This is not an unlikely possibility, as historic New Mexican furniture is still being stripped today, in solvent and in lye solutions (depending on the stubbornness of the paint) for resale in the Santa Fe antiques market.

This is why an examination of the role of cultural expectations is necessary to better understand New Mexican furniture and redirect current research. When so many pieces of furniture are routinely and drastically altered to meet modern expectations, it sometimes becomes difficult to separate modern perceptions from the material being studied.

This paper is presented as a preliminary report of work in progress. Further investigation is needed to assess the original appearance of New Mexican Spanish colonial furniture as a whole. Consideration of current findings suggests that if we change our cultural expectations we may change some of our analytical results as well.

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Notes

1. Unpublished research, R.B. McLaughlin, *Microscopical Pigment Analysis MOIFA Furniture Project 1982/1983.*

2. Lonn Taylor and Dessa Bokides, *New Mexican Furniture 1600-1940:*, (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1987) 7-8.

3. Accession records, The Harwood Foundation Museum of the University of New Mexico.

4. Taylor and Bokides, 49.

5. MacLaughlin, "Chest No. 9, Harwood Library," no page number.

6. Rutherford J. Gettens, Robert L. Fuller, and W.T. Chase, "Vermilion and Cinnabar," in Ashok Roy, ed., *Artists' Pigments*, vol. 2, (New York: 1993, Oxford University Press), 163.

7. Cross sections analyzed by the author of this paper for: Safford, Frances Gruber "Floral Painting on Early 18th Century American Furniture at The Metropolitan Museum of Art" in *Painted Wood: History and Conservation*, proceedings of a symposium sponsored by The Wooden Artifacts Group of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works and the Foundation of the AIC, publication in progress.

8. Taylor and Bokides, 49.

9. Ibid, 49.

10. Lonn Taylor, "Creating a 'Hispanic' Artifact: The Construction and Furnishing of the Martha and Elizabeth White House in Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1923-1929. Unpublished paper presented at the 1994 meeting of the New Mexico Historical Society.