

Camposanto crosses, angels are marriage made in heaven

By CANDELORA VERSACE

Tis the season when those who truly listen can hear the golden voices of angels ringing off of rooftops and cascading 'round the vigas.

And from now until the end of January, some very special angels will be gracing the adobe walls of the Santuario de Guadalupe.

"Angels are beings of light. They are the universal messengers, the door into whatever your beliefs are about the Godhead," said Cynthia Stibolt about the subject she never tires of painting.

Known for her graceful, faceless angels portrayed in airy watercolor, bedecked with gold and silver, Stibolt has added a new dimension to her beings of light. She has added a third dimension, to be precise.

Though some still hang flat on the wall, Stibolt has begun painting angels that fit inside old Mexican tin nichos, the ones with the glass doors and ancient patinas on their delicate, punched surfaces.

In addition, each nicho comes with a handcarved cross by Martin Rodriguez, who uses velvety, weathered barn-wood to execute designs inspired by the old camposanto crosses found in village cemeteries throughout New Mexico. A tiny candle completes each shrine.

"I found three of the nichos in an antique store in upstate New York and bought them all, although I wasn't sure what I was going to do with them," Stibolt said. "Once I found a source for them here in New Mexico, I just started collecting them. Then I saw Marty's crosses at the Trading Post in Chimayo and bought all of them, they were so wonderful."

"Putting it together was kind of a spontaneous thing, the whole project all came together just last month," she said. Stibolt added that until she saw Rodriguez's work, crosses had not held her interest before. "His design just brings it all out," she said.

Rodriguez, a full-time carpenter and self-taught carver, has been making his distinctive crosses for the last nine years. A cross made in Mexico inspired him to carve, and a book of camposanto family crosses as headstones given him by Elizabeth Buchanan at the Museum Shop got him started working with weathered barn-wood.



Angel nicho by Cynthia Stibolt and Martin Rodriguez

DETAILS

Who: Cynthia Stibolt & Martin Rodriguez
What: Angel nichos
When: through January
Where: Santuario de Guadalupe

"She thought it would give the crosses the same look as the ones in the camposantos," Rodriguez said. Now that he has been working with the material for several years, he said when he collects the wood, he instinctively has a feel for which pieces will hold together and which will crack under his delicate pressure.

Rodriguez has visited many camposantos throughout Northern New Mexico, but has found the most unusual cross designs at Ranchos de Taos, many dating from the early 1800s. Hearts and moons grace the cross bars, loops and flowers curve around the intersection of the two pieces, arrows and points finish off the ends.

"Each family would have its own cross, its own design," Rodriguez said. "The interesting thing is that many of them have Celtic influences or Russian Orthodox designs."

Some of Rodriguez's pieces are faithful reproductions of the old styles, but many utilize his own design or a melding of the two. Using a scrolling saw to cut out each two-piece cross, he hand-sands and details each one before assembling the crossbars. Most are under eight inches tall.

"What's so interesting about the crosses, and about the nichos, which I call light boxes, is that they blend the old and the new, they bring together all kind of traditions, all kinds of people," Stibolt said. The Russian Orthodox habit of lighting icons with electric lights also has an influence on some of Stibolt's boxes, although most can be lit with candles.

"When I talked to Marty after seeing his crosses, he understood the design immediately. He gets it the way I do. We've created these little environments. We both really

Continued on Page 65