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Policarpio Valencia's Embroidered Poetry

by
Annin Barrett

Policarpio Valencia was an artist, a poet, a salt merchant, farmer, water ditch boss, miller, town philosopher, and justice of the peace in the town of Santa Cruz, New Mexico, 25 miles north of Santa Fe. He lived in a section of Santa Cruz named El Santo Niño his whole life, from 1854 until 1931, where he married and had two children. Residents there were known as "*Cañaderos*" because they lived close to the old Santa Cruz Mission (built in the 1730s) which was called Santa Cruz de la Cañada. To get an idea of how geographically isolated this community was, it is interesting to note that he was considered a well traveled man because for a few years he had a trade route from Santa Cruz to Santa Fe to Taos, a distance of only about 70 miles.¹

Hispanic communities first began settling along the Rio Grande River in the 1590s. Franciscan friars came with these early Spanish settlers preaching a strong Christian moral code. They left Spain during the infamous Spanish Inquisition. In New Mexico, one of the most remote places in the Spanish Empire, there was not a lot of direct contact with the Roman Catholic Church. Those priests who were sent concentrated their efforts on converting Native Americans to Christianity. Spanish Catholics were largely left to themselves to practice their religion on their own. The *Penitentes* are a lay order of Catholicism that developed in Colonial New Mexico from followers of the Brotherhood of the Third Order of St. Francis, which began in 13th century Spain. They perform acts of charity, community service, and do penance in the form of self-flagellation and reenacting the crucifixion every Easter. They identify with the suffering of Christ by physical experience of pain in order to attain a higher spiritual awareness. Their rituals are controversial and they have often had to practice them covertly or be persecuted.

Policarpio Valencia may well have been a Penitente since during his lifetime most prominent members of New Mexico Spanish communities belonged to the Brotherhood, and Santa Cruz de la Cañada was a center of Penitente activity.² Whether or not he actually was one, there existed a general cultural aesthetic that valued self-denial and religious devotion. This coexisted with the frontier traits of self-sufficiency, reinventing traditions from the "old" country, and a keen awareness of death. Spanish New Mexicans made their own artwork out of local materials and developed a style that can still be seen today, called *santero* folk art. *Santos* are rough-hewn wooden carvings or painted panels of the saints. The crudeness of these pieces has a directness that can be compelling and even shocking. The realness of the spiritual realm in everyday life is an important feature of this style. Also, there was *colcha* embroidery used as altar cloths, made by women known as the *Carmelitas*, who are the female counterpart of the Brotherhood. Images of the Maltese cross, the Virgin Mary, or floral motifs were couch stitched in wool yarn. However, these colchas are very different visually, technically, and conceptually from Valencia's work.

Valencia's embroidery can be viewed as a kind of penance. Multiple layers of stitches completely cover the ground cloth in an obsessive working and reworking of the surface. It is done mostly in buttonhole stitch, with a few variations. This embroidery is outside of any traditional needlework style, but his work is very true to his cultural heritage of self-sufficiency, reinventing customs, and religious fervor. His innovative approach to embroidery utilized common four-ply cotton rug warp on used and patched fabrics. He stitched pictures of animals and floral designs as well as abstract geometric shapes and poetry. The subjects are often religious or moral messages. Nine of the ten known embroideries by Policarpo Valencia reside at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe. Several were originally accessioned by E. Boyd, curator of Spanish Colonial Arts at the Museum of New Mexico. A tenth piece is in the collection of The Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona. Irene Emery analyzed four of these pieces in the early 1950s. She called them "unlikely, even unbelievable," which is a fair description.³

Most of Valencia's stitchery is worked on pieced and patched used clothing or household textiles. Recycling is a way of life for isolated communities and Valencia made use of old rag rugs, scraps of cotton mattress ticking, knit underwear, and parts of a wool jacket for the ground cloth of his pieces. After he'd basted together enough scraps for a base, he'd cover the surface with a solid layer of buttonhole stitches. The colors have faded, but it is clear he used a variety of hues: orange, red, yellow, purple, blue, brown and white in an apparently random selection. If there was a hole or a missing corner he'd fill that in with needle lace, which is done the same way as a buttonhole stitch, but without piercing the cloth. Next, he'd stitch another layer of design: plants, animals or text.

Sacred symbols are found alongside the mundane facts of daily activities in Valencia's work. In one embroidery, the ground cloth is a wool blanket made by the Beacon Company, similar to a Pendleton blanket. It has Maltese crosses woven into its pattern. This medieval symbol has four arms representing the cross on which Jesus suffered, with eight points symbolizing the Beatitudes. Valencia repeated these crosses in buttonhole stitch interspersed with pictures of animals used by early Spanish settlers, and text describing how domestic animals were used. Another piece commemorates a local event in Valencia's lifetime, the reburial of the bones of 13 priests, with pictures of the crypts.⁴ Animals appear in this piece too, fit in among the deceased and the text. Familiarity with death is integral to Hispanic culture in America, and in particular to the Penitentes. Pictures of their favorite saints always show them holding a cross in one hand and a skull in the other.⁵

Valencia's embroideries are often made without a set orientation. The viewer is required to physically move around the piece to read the pictures and the writing. This is the case in *Sobremesa Antigua*, or Old Tablecloth, where one line of text is upside-down from the other. Perhaps Valencia still thought of the piece as a tablecloth to be placed on a table and viewed horizontally, but it is stiff with stitches and obviously no longer utilitarian. He has titled and signed this abstract geometric composition as part of the stitched design. This self-conscious awareness of artmaking is highly unusual for New

Mexican embroidery in the early 1900s. Colcha embroideries stitched by women were not signed.

Even more intriguing is the hidden poem in another piece. Valencia stitched a message onto the reverse side of a heavily embroidered abstract pattern, which translates into English as:

If this treasure should be lost, as
It is wont to happen, I entreat the one who finds
It he must give it back to me, and if he should be
Long of fingernails and short of understanding
I beg of him to be mindful of the

Seventh commandment. That is all.⁶

This is an eloquent warning label written as a poem. It gives an indication of Valencia's quirky sense of humor even while cautioning the reader not to steal.

The subject of morality is a recurrent theme in Valencia's poetry. In one piece the seven deadly sins are reviewed, and advice given for how to live a good life. It is written in a stream-of-consciousness style starting with, "December 15th I began to put these letters here..." The language is conversational and the reader is addressed directly. He signs this prose poem with, "I write for you – Policarpio Valencia."⁷ There are no pictures in this piece. The text is the design, squeezing into every part of the composition.

In a similar way, Medieval Islamic art sometimes used verses of the Koran as compositional elements. The legacy of Moorish Islamic art has filtered down through Spanish culture with its concept of iconoclasm and love of pattern, both of which occur in Valencia's work. In its strictest form, iconoclasm prohibits the representation of any image, regarding that as competing with God and therefore immoral. Valencia wrestles with this problem in an embroidered piece where he stitched pictures of animals and accompanied them with the following text: "Here are seen likenesses of animals that in all ways resemble their real appearance. There is an adage that says the lion is not as he is painted even if by a good painter. He who painted it first did so even to the color and so it is and shall be."⁸

An overwhelming concern with morality is also evident in probably the best known of Valencia's works. It is a *despedimiento*, or *alabado* poem written at the end of life asking forgiveness of one's sins and admonishing those who remain to live virtuously. The tradition of alabado poetry has been handed down through generations of Spanish New Mexicans to celebrate Christ (specifically Christ's Passion), the Virgin Mary, and also as a reminder of Judgment Day.⁹ This is another one of Valencia's embroideries where the text is the major design element. The commercially woven belt inserted near the bottom is the only area not completely covered with stitches and text. The lines of text gently curve in opposing arcs against the background layer of stitches, creating the illusion of three dimensions, a kind of vortex around which the words swirl.

Policarpio Valencia was a unique artist and while there is no other work quite like his, a similar spirit of innovation, religious observation, and directness is seen in other Northern New Mexico Hispanic folk art of his era. Conceptual elements of Moorish Islamic art can also be seen in his work with its emphasis on pattern and text. By the turn of the last century, the recent arrival of the railroad had brought a flood of Anglos and Anglo culture to Santa Fe. It is possible Valencia saw Victorian pieced quilts or stitched samplers and incorporated these design ideas into his own compositions as well. But he was a true textile maverick, and his work reflects his artistic genius.

Notes

1. Claudia Larcombe, Samuel Larcombe, and Marta Weigle, "E. Boyd's Working Notes on Policarpio Valencia and His Alabado Embroidery," in *Hispanic Arts and Ethnohistory in the Southwest*, (Santa Fe, N.M.: Ancient City Press, 1983), 129-30.
2. Alice Corbin Henderson, *Brothers of Light*, (New York, N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1937), 53-4.
3. Irene Emery, "Samplers Embroidered in String," in *El Palacio*, vol. 60, no. 2, 1953, 42.
4. Information from 1978 notes by Reynalda Dinkel in the archives of the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, N.M.
5. Ray John de Aragón, *Hermanos de la Luz: Brothers of the Light* (Santa Fe, N.M.: Heartfire Books, 1998), 253.
6. Virginia Churchill Bath, *Needlework in America* (New York, N.Y.: Viking Press, 1979), 120.
7. Translated by Pris Anton in 1992, in the archives of the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, N.M.
8. Charlene Cerny and Christine Mather, "Textile Production in Twentieth Century New Mexico," in *Rio Grande Textiles*, Nora Fisher, ed. (Santa Fe, N.M.: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1994), 145.
9. Weigle, ed. *Hispanic Arts and Ethnohistory in the Southwest*, 134.