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Land of Enchantment: New Mexico as Cultural Crossroads

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Gustave Baumann
American, born Germany, 1881–1971
Falling Leaves, 1950
Woodcut
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University of Nebraska–Lincoln
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Land and Landscape

New Mexico’s area—the sixth largest in the country—contains many idiosyncratic terrestrial features, from broken mesas and extinct volcanoes to conifer-covered mountains and deep gorges. The San Andres and Sangre de Cristo ranges, of which Wheeler Peak is the state’s highest at 13,167 feet, divide New Mexico in half longitudinally. The snowmelt-swollen Rio Grande, the fourth-longest river in the United States, parallels these landmasses to the west. Water is a precious commodity, given the territory’s large arid and semi-arid zones. Flora such as cholla and yucca and fauna such as roadrunners and kangaroo rats have all adapted to the region’s extreme conditions. New Mexico’s particular quality of light, which owes its clarity and brightness to a consistent lack of humidity, continues to attract and retain artists.

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“If you ever go to New Mexico, it will itch you for the rest of your life.”
— Georgia O’Keeffe
Native Voices

Early in the first millennium of the Common Era, the two ancient cultural groups of the Mogollon and the Anasazi began to settle the area now known as New Mexico. Though various economic, social, and environmental pressures eventually caused these peoples to migrate and to adapt, many of their material innovations—such as architectural complexes of multiple stories and ceramic objects with geometric designs—and their agricultural practices—such as cultivation of maize—persist among their modern day descendants: the Hopi, the Zuni, and New Mexico’s nineteen Pueblo tribes. Sixteenth-century Spanish colonizers imposed Christianity on the local indigenous populations, who continued, however, to observe their own religious traditions, resulting in a modified Catholicism. Despite Manifest Destiny’s implicit tenet that all Native Americans would inevitably become extinct with the arrival of the modern era, Puebloans remain a vital social presence and an important economic force in today’s world.

Hispanic Traditions

Spanish exploration of the desert Southwest commenced with Francisco Vázquez de Coronado’s expedition in the mid-sixteenth century; Spanish settlement took place under Juan de Oñate’s governorship at the end of the century. These colonizers brought markedly different customs to the region, including maintenance of sheep and horses; husbandry of wheat and fruit trees; and institution of the printing press and public squares (from which English derives the word plaza). The anecdotal evidence of folkways, particularly of food preparation, passed down from generation to generation, also supports the early presence of assimilated Jews, who had been expelled from the Iberian Peninsula and were keeping a low profile in the provinces. Nonetheless, Roman Catholicism saturated the New Mexican imaginary, inspiring santeros (religious object makers) to fashion numerous retablos (two-dimensional icons), bultos (devotional sculptures), and other liturgical items. Patron saints El Santo Niño de Atocha, Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, San Isidro, San Pasqual, and San Francisco all gained in local popularity and their images permeate the visual culture of New Mexico to this day.
Anglo Modernism

The United States government established the New Mexico Territory—composed of present-day New Mexico, Arizona, and parts of Colorado—on September 9, 1850. The arrival of the railroad in 1879 opened full-scale trade and migration with the East. New Mexico, with its current boundaries, was admitted to statehood on January 6, 1912. The first half of the twentieth century saw a tremendous influx of Anglo settlers—from Texas oilmen and midwestern farmers to tuberculosis patients and Los Alamos physicists—who brought their work ethic, Protestantism, and amenities along with them. After rough terrain shattered one of their wagon's wheels, New York artists Bert Geer Phillips and Ernest Blumenschein decided to stay in isolated northern New Mexico; they subsequently founded the Taos Society of Artists in 1915, launching the region's reputation as a destination for creatives of all types. The implementation of New Deal programs across the region in the 1930s further enhanced New Mexico's modernization.

Art Since the Manhattan Project

In a certain regard, New Mexico played an instrumental role in bringing World War II to an end: Navajo code talkers baffled the Axis forces; the scientists working for the Manhattan Project, which occupied several mesas west of San Ildefonso Pueblo, researched and developed the first atomic bombs; the White Sands desert furnished the milieu for testing these missiles. After the armistice, all Americans grappled with a looming threat of nuclear war, an increasing speed of daily life, and a burgeoning sense of international connectedness. During the second half of the twentieth century some New Mexican artists chose to distill their experience of desert existence down to the formalist basics of clear colors and simple shapes; others, inspired by the uncoupling of signifier from signified, pursued maximalist expressions with open-ended—and viewer-driven—meanings. Beginning in the 1990s, Hispanos and Native Americans defiantly reclaimed their respective visual and material cultural traditions and layered them with critiques of colonialism and capitalism, then sold these wares around the world via wide-reaching market platforms such as the Internet. Global climate change and its concomitant impact on water tables mean that the land is once again a focus in the twenty-first century for the region's inhabitants, its many artists included.


— Jonathan Frederick Walz, Ph.D.
Curator of American Art