



## Smithsonian American Art Museum

December 2011



### *Our Lady of Guadalupe*

ca. 1780-1830

#### **Pedro Antonio Fresquís**

Born: 1749

Died: 1831

water-based paint on wood

18 5/8 x 10 3/4 x 7/8 in. (47.3 x 27.3 x 2.2 cm.)

Smithsonian American Art Museum

Gift of Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr. and  
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Cross Johnson

1986.65.113

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

*In beginning her research for Our Lady of Guadalupe, researcher Laura first needed to understand certain terms before she could examine the historical context and significance of this artwork. Fresquís was the first native-born New Mexican santero, which means “saint maker.” Santeros were artisans who created art for home altars or churches. They created various types of santos, or holy objects, such as bultos and retablos. This type of santo is called a retablo, which is a form of devotional folk art painted on wood; its iconography is derived from traditional art of the Catholic Church. Laura began her investigation with these questions:*

- How did the art of the *santero* originate? What was life like for a santero?

- How is a *retablo* like this one made? Where did an artist like Fresquís obtain his materials?

I began my research by looking for the basic background information on why the *retablos* were made and how they came to be in colonial New Mexico. Several books that specialized in discussing religious folk art in America led me to the following information. With growing concerns over British influence in North America the Spanish, having previously conquered Mexico, set out to establish a presence for themselves in New Mexico in 1598. Missions were set up in an effort to convert all of the indigenous people to Catholicism. Aside from a few rebellions, the conversion of the indigenous population to Catholicism was successful. By the time Fresquís was actively painting in New Mexico in 1780, most of the indigenous population had been converted.

I started to look into the tradition of the *retablos* and the *santeros* that produced them. Several book sources I located informed me that the works these *santeros* produced were not born from any commercial motive, but from a “deep-felt spiritual need, in their creators as well as in the persons requesting them” (Dewhurst, 1983.) These works were commissioned and in return for the finished product, the *santero* would either receive cash or commodities like beans or corn. The *santero* would also often live with the family commissioning the *retablo* while he worked to complete it. One scholar has likened the profession of a *santero* to that of an eighteenth-century New England itinerant portrait painter. Given the religious nature of their work, *santeros* were expected to be exemplary citizens with a reputation for holiness by moral behavior. The role of the *santero* was viewed as a very important one as he had to be able to embody the community’s devotion to the saints in his artwork (Frank, 2001.)

As the *santero* was not working in large cities with access to a wealth of supplies and was often traveling, I was curious to know what materials he would use to create these devotional images. Through a book on images in New Mexican churches I was able to learn that the materials used for making *retablos* were those that the *santeros* could easily acquire. The wood *santeros* used came from readily available local sources, usually from a cottonwood tree or a pinewood tree. They would mix their own pigments from purchased items, insects, minerals, and plants. Most of these could be found locally but the *santeros* did import some pigments such as indigo, vermilion, and cochineal. The local clays and minerals available provided hues of yellow, blue, red, brown, and green. Additionally reds, yellows, and browns could come from boiled native plants, roots, and flowers. Carbon soot and various burned organic matter was used for a black color. As a stabilizer, *santeros* would use fruit-tree gum, yucca-pod syrup, or squash-seed gum. The wood was primed with ground gypsum mixed with water and glue made from animal-hide paste or wheat-flour paste. Fresquís in particular was known for his use of *sgraffito*. *Sgraffito* is the process of scratching or incising through wet paint to reveal the color and designs of another color underneath. The use of *sgraffito* can be seen in *Our Lady of Guadalupe* in the decorative border. Once the painting was completed, the *santero* would seal the image with pine sap (Cash, 1999.)

Observing how important these devotional images were to the people of New Mexico made me want to determine if the tradition of making retablos ever transitioned into today's world. I decided that it would be interesting to find out if there were any modern-day artists currently working in the *santeros* tradition, especially given the continued prominence of religious devotional art to the Mexican-American culture. Coincidentally, while looking online for other museums that exhibit work by Fresquís and other *santeros*, I discovered a wealth of sources available on the New Mexico History Museum's website, including one that taught me all about modern-day *santeros* practicing in New Mexico. What is fascinating is that these artisans practice making *retablos* using the exact same materials and techniques *santeros* like Fresquís employed over two-hundred years ago. In [this informative video](#) which corresponds to the New Mexico History Museum's exhibition on *santos*, you can follow the entire process of how a retablo is made from start to finish.

Based on what I have already learned, I have formulated some questions which could lead to further research concerning *Our Lady of Guadalupe*:

- The curatorial file on this painting indicates that it may have been part of a larger altarpiece painting. Is there any evidence of altars painted by Fresquís that were disassembled? Are there any extant *retablos* of this period or any created by Fresquís that could substantiate this theory?
- As the *santero* was not a professionally trained artist, what sources did the *santero* look at to gain inspiration for his designs on the *retablos*?

### **Bibliography: Pedro Antonio Fresquís, *Our Lady of Guadalupe***

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