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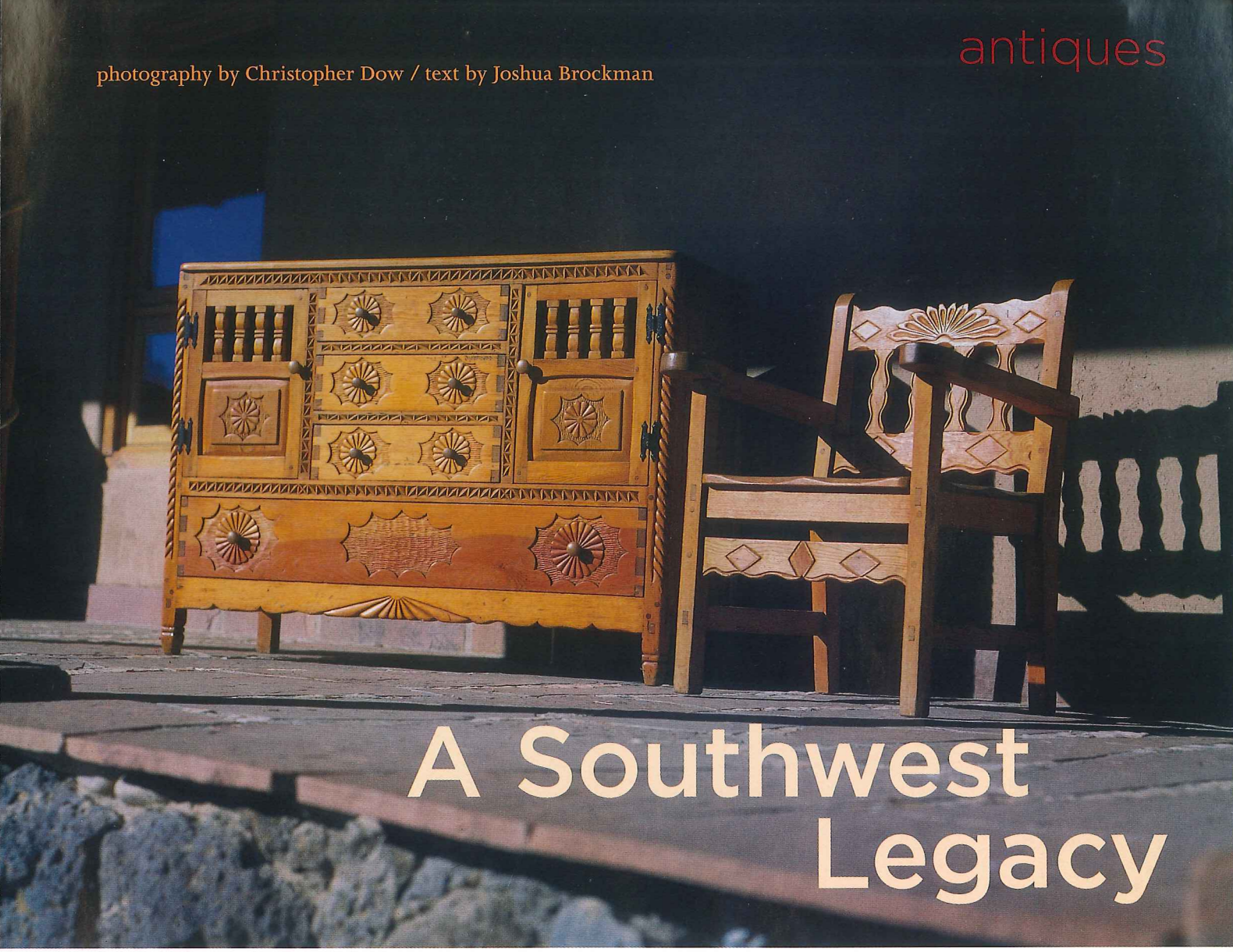


A Southwest Legacy

A ponderosa sideboard by George Martinez and a ponderosa armchair with juniper and cedar inlays by Cruz A. Valerio, c. 1940s-1950s, both from Taos. Collection of Rancho Milagro.

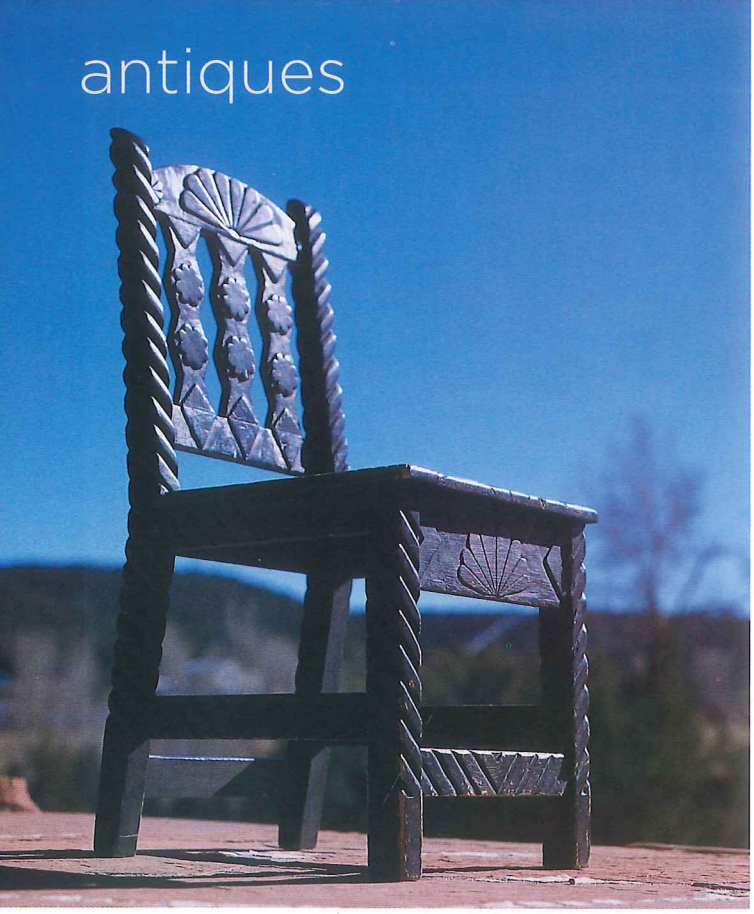
WPA programs in New Mexico resulted in hand-carved furniture of remarkable beauty. Today it's rare—and highly prized.

With its carved surfaces, stained coloration and designs rooted in the Spanish Colonial tradition, Works Progress Administration (WPA) furniture is among the most visible vestiges of the New Deal in New Mexico. WPA furniture is remarkable not only for the variety of forms created during the era, from the 1930s to the beginning of World War II, but also for its stylized approach that integrated historic designs into contemporary furniture made for everyday use.

"The WPA period is impressive because of design work, creativity and how particular craftsmen handle a specific situation and try to make it their own," says Luis Tapia, a sculptor as well as a restorer and collector of WPA-era furniture. "It's always exciting to see a WPA piece because you never know what you're going to look at. Where the freedom came in was in the design work."

The intense focus on the advancement of woodworking during the WPA period resulted in furniture that reflects close attention to composition, proportion, color and grain. While much of the furniture revived historic motifs from Spanish and Mexican traditions, other examples explored modern tangents, with Art Déco patterns, ornate carvings, inlays and painted imagery.

Above all, WPA furniture was utilitarian. This functionality is evident in the types of furniture that woodworkers made but rarely signed. Chairs were produced in the greatest numbers. Desks, dining tables, dressers, blanket boxes, storage chests, small boxes, lamps and picture frames were also popular. Closets



were not usual fixtures in adobe homes, so *roperos* (wardrobes) were commonplace, as were *trasteros* (kitchen cupboards).

The most common motif on furniture is a carved rosette that at first glance appears to be a floral element. Tapia says it represents a cockleshell, a symbol of pilgrimage. Chip carving, a Moorish tradition, also frequently adorns the frames of chairs, tables, dressers and cabinets. The design vocabulary was "an adaptation of the Spanish Colonial styles," says Robin Farwell Gavin, curator of collections at the Museum of Spanish Colonial Art in Santa Fe. "What changed were the training methods. In the Colonial period, there was an informal guild system where, usually, members of a family would teach other members of a family, or they would take in apprentices. In the WPA period, it changed so that it was a government-sponsored industry."

In New Mexico, New Deal artists produced work for public buildings, private commissions and their own homes. Furniture making was already a long-standing tradition in Hispanic communities in New Mexico. Woodworkers engaged in producing revival furniture as early as 1917, when the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe outfitted its new building with pieces designed by Jesse Nusbaum and others from the museum. Starting in 1926, painter and builder William Penhallow Henderson used the Hispanic tradition as a point of departure to create contemporary furniture with geometrical, Art Déco-like designs that today command some of the highest prices for furniture from this era.

Appreciation for Hispanic arts grew in Santa Fe in the 1920s due to the enthusiasm and buying power of a burgeoning group of Anglo collectors and the city's enclave of artists. In 1925, the Spanish Colonial Arts Society was established to help document and preserve Hispanic aesthetic traditions and to encourage artists to maintain connections to their roots.

"It was the first opportunity that Hispanic artists had to get

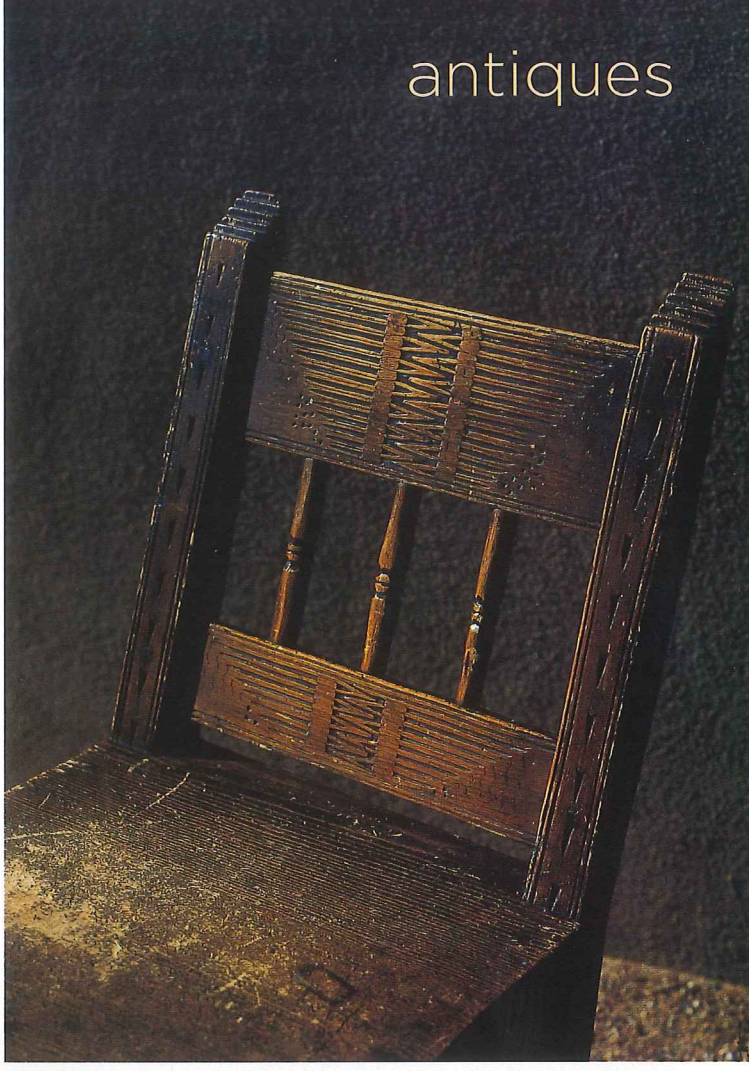
clockwise from top left: A stained ponderosa side chair, c. 1950s-1960s, Rancho Milagro; a chair with pueblo scene, c. 1940s, collection of Murdoch Finlayson; a chest by Paul Victorino from Acoma, New Mexico, 1954, Rancho Milagro.

recognized for their cultural work," says Kathryn A. Flynn, executive director of the National New Deal Preservation Association and author of *Treasures on New Mexico Trails: Discover New Deal Art and Architecture*. "The furniture and the tinwork were part of their lives, but they never had an opportunity to market it, so this gave them that opportunity. By so doing, it also saved those designs."

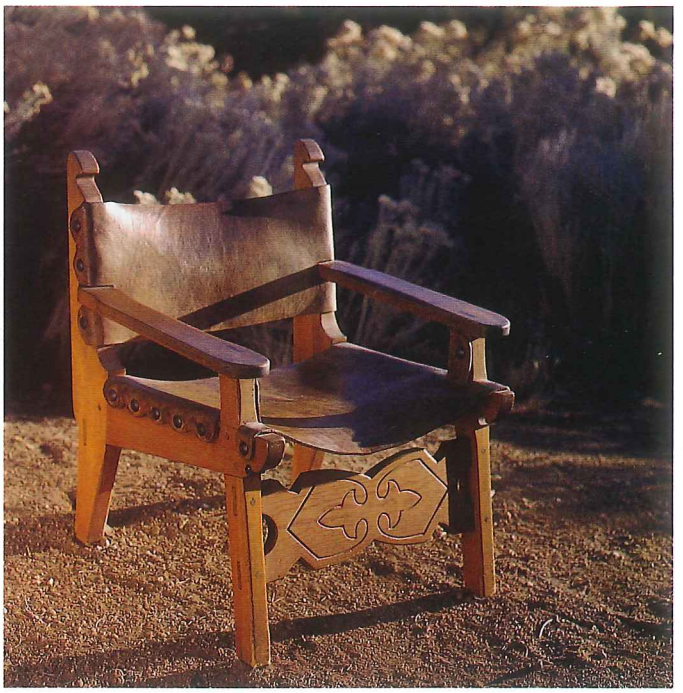
Between 1933 and 1939, the State Department of Vocational Education published trade and industrial bulletins (nicknamed "blue books" because of their blue covers) that contained authentic designs drawn from furniture in New Mexico homes, museums and private collections. The books focused on Spanish Colonial, Spanish, and Mexican furniture and provided blueprints for it. The *Spanish Colonial Furniture Bulletin*, one of the most popular, was distributed at vocational schools as a method of ensuring that the schools would produce authentic New Mexican designs.

By 1936 most Hispanic communities in northern New Mexico —including Taos, El Rito, Peñasco, Chupadero and Mora—had programs. Federal arts centers were established in Las Cruces, Roswell, Gallup, Las Vegas and other locations. By 1938 the state had forty schools, sustained by federal and state funding.

Prior to these programs, artists primarily used indigenous ponderosa pine to construct furniture. But its dense wood made it difficult to carve, so the well-funded programs imported sugar pine, a softer wood, from the West. Artists also occasionally used



right: A 1920s-1930s chair from Santa Fe with Cochiti-style carving, Murdoch Finlayson. **below:** A selection of furniture includes a 1930s-1940s table with drawers, found in an Albuquerque barn; children's chairs; and assorted small boxes, including a mailbox by José Dolores Lopez, Cordova, New Mexico, c. 1920s. Murdoch Finlayson.



above: A leather chair by Abad E. Lucero, 1946. **left, from top:** A ponderosa chest from Mora, New Mexico, c. 1950s; a ponderosa chest by Moises LeFrebre, Las Vegas, c. 1940s-1950s; a chest by Aurelio Pacheco of Chamisal, New Mexico, Rancho Milagro.

oak or mahogany for construction, and cedar became a popular accent. "Look at WPA furniture and you won't see any knots," says Tapia. "They used the best-quality materials available to them." Technological innovations were also introduced, including table saws, band saws, drills, lathes and fine carving tools.

Certain locales became known for highly stylized furniture. Chupadero furniture is famous for its skeletal chairs and tables made from rawhide, willow and wood. Stepped finials, carving on posts that resembles cornstalks, and shallow linear gouges are some of the characteristics of Cochiti Pueblo furniture. Las Vegas furniture has ornate carving with deep bullet-size gouges made with a router. In the region of Mora, east of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, some furniture has a black-and-white look created by offsetting natural wood with shoe polish coloration. Almost all woodworkers from the era used shellac, which imparts an orange or yellow glow to the furniture's surface.

"During the WPA era, the administrators, who were for the most part Anglos, were very much interested in focusing on quality," says Andrew Connors, senior curator for the National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque. "They wanted craftspeople to use the traditional techniques and to make furniture that had lasting value. There was less interest in innovation than in duplication of the past. However there were several workers who, after the WPA era, continued making furniture and really made some very important pieces."

Among them was Abad E. Lucero, who taught in vocational schools, supervised federal arts programs and developed his own style of modern carving. An upholstered chair with colcha-style embroidery by one of Lucero's students, Domingo Tejada, was displayed at the 1939 World's Fair in New York. George Segura was a driving force behind the El Rito style, teaching students how to create modern furniture with geometric spindles and panels.

When the United States entered World War II, federal funding

poured into the war effort and the market for furniture dried up. After World War II and the Korean War, however, there was renewed emphasis on furniture making in classes and workshops that were part of G.I. retraining programs.

Today WPA-era handmade furniture has become an endangered species. Hundreds if not thousands of pieces have vanished from homes, office buildings, post offices, schools and courthouses, largely because of wear and tear and neglect. Furniture makers never used glue to bond the mortise-and-tenon joinery, so when furniture lost its stability, it was typically thrown out. The pieces that do turn up often have paint splotches, dings and assorted scars.

"My grandmother had a lot of furniture in her house that was WPA because my uncles were involved in WPA programs," recalls Tapia. "It really wasn't thought of as nice furniture. It didn't get the proper respect it deserved, especially in the forties and fifties."

The challenge of finding furniture from the 1930s to 1950s appealed to Murdoch Finlayson, who has collected and sold it for more than three decades. "I first encountered it in the pueblos," he says. "I'd be out looking for Indian art, and then I saw the furniture and it intrigued me."

Some Indian furniture makers enrolled in vocational schools near their pueblos, including the Peña Blanca school, located between the Cochiti and Santo Domingo pueblos, or at the vocational school in Grants, not far from Acoma Pueblo, says Finlayson. Indian furniture has its own idiosyncrasies and refinements. A Santo Domingo sideboard might employ glass doors in lieu of solid wooden ones to display blankets and jewelry. Designs on Santo Domingo furniture also sometimes include terraced carving, incised chevrons or arrowheads, and feather-like designs. Squash or pomegranate blossoms, elongated rosettes resembling conchos, and kiva step motifs surrounding rosettes are other common patterns.

The design legacy of WPA-era furniture is safeguarded by several public collections in New Mexico, and it continues to be an inspiration to woodworkers. Although the furniture is becoming increasingly hard to find, it remains highly sought after by collectors for its tangible and handmade connection to New Mexico's cultural landscape. ✣

Dealers in WPA furniture:
Lane Coulter Antiques, 505.983.3232
Murdoch Finlayson, 505.983.1708
Owings-Dewey Fine Art, 505.982.6244
Shipley Gallery American Art, 505.751.7541