

Beauty and the Truth

Our cover image this month is a mid-nineteenth century watercolor painting from a collection in the Museum of International Folk Art. In “From Lima to Canton and Back,” Director of Museum Resources Barbara Anderson tells a surprising tale of where these watercolors were painted, the



ELIZA WELLS SMITH

Cynthia Baughman

international market they served, and the Peruvian tradition that led to their creation. You can see two of these rare watercolors in the exhibition *Folk Art of the Andes*, opening at the Museum of International Folk Art in April, and the entire set of eleven in our online exhibition at elpalacio.org.

The *El Palacio* staff was entranced by these watercolors, by their curious history, by the delicate detail, and by the variety of Peruvians depicted. We loved the way the proud, saucy, stylish lady and her steed fill our cover. Over the years, our covers have featured many a fine fellow on horseback, but no one can remember a female rider, and we liked evening that score. Yet, for all of this consensus, these watercolors also led us into a debate about beauty, truth, history, scholarship, conservation, and Photoshop that still roils in our corridors.

As Anderson explains in her essay, these watercolors were painted on exceptionally fragile paper, and over time they developed holes, rips, stains, and some unfortunate amateur repairs. Museum staff matted the two relatively intact watercolors in *Folk Art of the Andes* so that they could both endure the strains of exhibition and put their best daintily shod feet forward. But several of the images that illustrate Anderson’s essay are quite damaged, and the graphic designer was asked to “conserve” them digitally—that is, remove the damage in Photoshop, which, being a Photoshop whiz, she did handily.

And then one of our staff protested, arguing that we are not the kind of magazine that touches up our cover gals; that part of our mission is to convey history, and that removing this damage electronically amounts to tampering with the historical record. But a scholar countered that the tissue-paper repair to *Woman with Embroidered Shawl on Burro* is not historically significant—it doesn’t yield useful information about the watercolor, and a conservator would remove it. A curator



Woman with Embroidered Shawl on Burro in Lima, Peru by an unknown artist working in Canton, China, in the mid-19th century. Watercolor on pith paper, with silk ribbon. 11 ½" x 8 ½". Gift of Frank and Maurine Iklé, Museum of International Folk Art. See the image full-size, with the bad repair digitally removed, on page 51.

lamented that the tissue paper was distracting. An archivist fretted that a scholar might travel to our collections to pursue research and find a discrepancy between the object that exists and our representation of it. The graphic designer was asked to swap out the modified images for the originals in her layout, and each version had its advocates. A third option arose: Could we remove the offending tissue paper, but leave some of the moderate damage? Our patient designer printed out an oversized set of retouched and un-retouched images and instructed us to circle the damage we wanted preserved for publication. We settled on removing the tissue paper, toning down a few of the stains, but leaving much of the discoloration of age and all the rips and holes.

Did we do the right thing? The debate continues, so join in.
—Cynthia Baughman, cynthia.baughman@state.nm.us