



TSE TSIAN

PABLITA

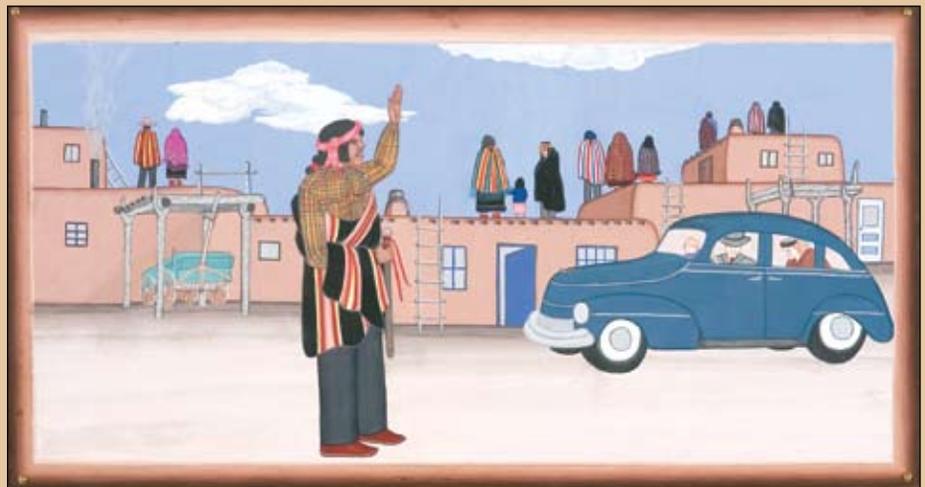
Velarde

From New Deal Painter to Legendary Artist

BY SHELBY J. TISDALE

The Indians of New Mexico who participated in the federal Public Works of Arts Project (PWAP) from 1933 to 1945 were among the leading Indian painters, potters, and sculptors of the twentieth century. During the New Deal era and under the sponsorship of federal arts projects, they not only created works of significant artistic and historical value, they also helped to establish Santa Fe as a center for Indian art and the Santa Fe Indian School as an institution that fostered both traditional and innovative arts. Moreover, the success of the PWAP can be seen on the Santa Fe Plaza and in local galleries in the number of Indian artists who generate a large part of their income from the sale of their artwork and the growing

Governor Greets the Tourists, ca. 1940, casein on masonite. The governor of the pueblo or another tribal official sometimes greets visitors on feast days. During these events, the governor holds his cane of authority, which signifies his position in the village. Courtesy Bandelier National Monument, New Mexico. BAND 653.



number of artists and their patrons at the annual Santa Fe Indian Market.

By comparison, few such opportunities existed when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt appointed John Collier as commissioner of Indian affairs after initiating his New Deal emergency programs to boost the national economy and help bring the nation out of the Great Depression. Collier took full advantage of New Deal funds to promote Indian arts and crafts. In 1933 federal appropriations to the Indian Service provided funding for Native Americans to participate in the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Public Works Administration, the PWAP, and the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture.

The PWAP was funded in 1934. Jesse L. Nusbaum, director of the Laboratory of Anthropology, was appointed director and chairman of the Thirteenth Regional Committee of the PWAP, which included New Mexico and Arizona. The headquarters of the Indian Division was at the Santa Fe Indian School, then a boarding school run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Thirty Indian painters and craftspeople from the pueblos and the Navajo reservation were given room and board. Under the direction of painting teacher Dorothy Dunn and crafts teacher Mabel Morrow, the students painted murals and watercolors, wove rugs, and made pottery.

The students included two sixteen-year-olds: Pablita Velarde (Santa Clara) and Andy Tsinajinnie (Navajo). They worked with established artists Tonita Peña (San Ildefonso), Velino Shije Herrera (Zia), Emiliano Abeyta (San Juan), Tony Archuleta (Taos), Calvin Tyndall (Omaha), and Jack Hokeah (Kiowa). Six Navajo weavers completed twelve rugs based



Woman Making Pottery, ca. 1940, casein on masonite. Pottery-making, practiced among the Pueblos for more than a thousand years, is a vital craft among present-day people. Most contemporary potters still use the age-old materials and methods. Courtesy Bandelier National Monument, New Mexico. BAND 3098.

on designs they had selected from rugs in the Laboratory of Anthropology's collections. The weavers who participated in this project were Nellie Cowboy, Mrs. John Jim, Mrs. Elizabeth Pablo, Mary Phillips, Sally Kinlichini, and Bah. Pueblo potters Maria and Julian Martinez (San Ildefonso), Lela and Evangelio Gutierrez (San Ildefonso), Eulogio Naranjo (Santa Clara), and Agapina Quintana (Cochiti) completed sixty-two pots.

At the time the goal of this program was to provide artworks to decorate Indian Service buildings that were being built by the Public Works projects and to stimulate Native



Harvest Dance, ca. 1940, casein on masonite. This harvest or corn dance is performed in the summer and fall. It is a dance of thanks for good crops, and prayers for blessings for all the people of the world. The six figures include two men, two women, one koshare (ceremonial clown), and a singer/drummer. Courtesy Bandelier National Monument, New Mexico. BAND 664.

arts and crafts. The program did that and more. Many of the young, emerging artists became famous, their art collected and cherished by individuals and institutions.

Today, several of the works created by the emerging artists at the Santa Fe Indian School are at the Museum of Indian Arts & Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology. In the collections are three black-on-black jars by Maria and Julian Martinez; two polychrome jars by Lela and Evangelio Gutierrez; and Navajo blankets by Sally Kinlichinni, Mrs. John Jim, Nellie Cowboy, and Bah.

In 1939, at the age of nineteen, former PWAP artist Pablita Velarde was commissioned by the National Park Service to do a series of paintings under the Works Progress Administration (WPA). For six years Velarde created scenes of traditional Pueblo culture for the walls of the visitor center being built at Bandelier National Monument. In all, she produced eighty-four paintings in casein on masonite, matte board, and glass. That body of work is the basis for the exhibition *A New Deal for Tse Tsan: Pablita Velarde at Bandelier*.

The current exhibition at the Museum of Indian Arts & Culture provides a glimpse into Pablita Velarde's early creative life, of which she said, "This period of my life at Bandelier, I figure, I've learned more about my own people . . . than I would have." In addition to the paintings on loan from Bandelier National Monument, Velarde's family has made her paints, brushes, mixing trays, awards, and ribbons available for exhibit.



Buffalo Dance, ca. 1940, casein on masonite. This buffalo dance is usually performed during Santa Clara Pueblo's annual feast day on August 12. The northern pueblos have different versions of the buffalo dance, which usually takes place during the winter and spring. Courtesy of Bandelier National Monument, New Mexico. BAND 706.

Born in 1918 at Santa Clara Pueblo to Herman and Marianita (Chavarria) Velarde, Pablita, like other children in the pueblo, spoke only Tewa and was taught traditional values and attitudes by the stories of elders. She was named Tse Tsan (Golden Dawn) by her grandmother Qualupita. Tse Tsan's mother died when Pablita was about three years old. A few years later her father sent her to Saint Catherine's Indian School, a boarding school in Santa Fe. When she was in the eighth grade she was transferred to Santa Fe Indian School, and there she met and became deeply influenced by Tonita Peña and Dorothy Dunn. Peña (1893–1949), the sole Pueblo

Pueblo Home Life, ca. 1940, casein on masonite. A cutaway view of a two-story Pueblo home in the early 1900s, showing interior structure and daily activities: using adobe bricks to construct a house, baking bread in an horno (outdoor oven), rocking an infant in a cradle suspended from the ceiling, cutting meat to make jerky, cooking at a corner fireplace, and grinding corn. The round structure is a kiva, a chamber used for religious ceremonies and dances and also for teaching and gatherings. Courtesy Bandelier National Monument, New Mexico. BAND 672.



easel woman painter of her generation, befriended the young Velarde when they both were painting murals as part of the PWAP. After Dunn started the painting program at the Santa Fe Indian School in 1932, Pablita and her sister Rosita were the first female students in Dunn's Studio program.

The teenager took up the art of easel painting even though it was not considered an appropriate role for a Pueblo woman and certainly not an appropriate career choice. Then there was her subject matter, which expresses a woman's view of Pueblo life. At that time, the interests and concerns of women were of little interest to other Pueblo artists and non-Indian observers.

Velarde's interpretations of Pueblo life were influenced by experiments with perspective, use of color, levels of realism and abstraction, and new techniques and materials. Unlike many Pueblo women, who aspired to the traditional achievements of marriage, motherhood, pottery making, and participation in village life, she chose to make painting her life's tribute to Pueblo culture and its ceremonies, symbols, and stories. Today, Velarde's paintings have come to represent the strength and resilience of Pueblo cultural identity.

By the time she graduated from the Santa Fe Indian School, Velarde's artwork had been displayed at the Museum of New Mexico, the Chicago Century of Progress Exposition, and the Corcoran Gallery. After her work at Bandelier, Velarde went on to become known as the most prominent Indian woman easel painter in the nation, winning dozens of awards in regional and national competitions. She had one-woman



Silversmith, ca. 1940, casein on masonite. This Pueblo craftsman wears a concha belt, and there are finished bracelets to his right. Silversmithing was introduced in the Southwest in the 1860s. Courtesy Bandelier National Monument, New Mexico. BAND 707.

shows in New Mexico, Florida, and California. In 1953 she was the first woman to receive the Grand Purchase Award at the Philbrook Art Center's Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Indian Painting. In 1954 the French government honored her with the Palmes Academiques for excellence in art. Between 1938 and 2005 she regularly won prizes for her paintings at the Museum of New Mexico, New Mexico State Fair, Gallup Inter-Tribal Ceremonial, Denver Art Museum, M. H. de Young Museum, Philbrook Art Center, and the annual Southwestern Indian Art Market in Santa Fe, where she often took first place and best of show.

New Deal 75th Commemoration

Sunday, April 6, 2008, the Museum of Indian Arts & Culture will kick off the New Deal 75th Commemoration with the opening of an exhibition featuring Indian artists from the museum's collections who were supported by the Public Works Administration Project. As part of this celebration featuring New Deal Indian artists, the exhibition *A New Deal for Tse Tsan: Pablita Velarde at Bandelier* has been extended through April 20, 2008.

The National New Deal Preservation Association plans events throughout New Mexico and will hold its first celebration at the Museum of Indian Arts & Culture, April 4–6, 2008. For more information on this and other New Deal events: nweddeal@cybermesa.com and www.IndianArts&Culture.org.



Bow and Arrow Dance, ca. 1940, paint on masonite. This dance honors the importance of bows and arrows in hunting and their former use as weapons for defending the community. Courtesy Bandelier National Monument, New Mexico. BAND 674.

As Velarde searched for subject matter for her paintings, she became interested in recording the legends, tales, and customs of her village. She once said, “I appreciate what the old ones have tried to pass on.” In 1960 her efforts to preserve those memories were published as a book, *Old Father, the Story Teller*, which was reissued in 1990. By 1970 she had appeared on television and in three feature films, and been the subject of more than fifty newspaper and magazine articles.

Always looking for new ways to establish her personal vision and express it more deeply, Velarde drew on images from rock art, pottery, and ancient Pueblo murals to enlarge the scope of her art. In her later years she continued her experimentation with mineral pigments and became celebrated for elaborating the earth-color technique. Using pigments from rocks, clay, and soil, she pulverized them on a grinding stone and mixed and prepared the paints herself.

Velarde blazed the trail for succeeding generations of Pueblo women and Indian women of all tribes who aspire to be creative in a nontraditional way. An independent, outspoken advocate of women’s rights, she led an unconventional life that has given other women the courage to become painters, sculptors, historians, writers, and filmmakers. The support of the WPA and the opportunity to work independently at Bandelier enabled her to walk her own path, one she began to travel when she was only fourteen years old.

When Pablita Velarde died in January 2006 she left not only a lasting legacy for the young artists of today to emulate but also the unforgettable body of work that she lived to create: “I want the earth to remember me through my work.” ■

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A Teacher Writes About Her Student

By Dorothy Dunn

Pablita Velarde may well be considered the principal woman painter of Pueblo life since Indian Art's irreplaceable loss of Quah Ah in 1950. She is resourceful, industrious, a fine technician, and she has admirably retained much of the freshness and naiveté of expressions that characterized her early paintings.

It has been just twenty years since Pablita began her painting career at the United States Indian School, Santa Fe, in September, 1932. She says that she had never done any painting before that time, and only such ordinary drawings as were required in connection with regular classroom studies. When she entered this school in the seventh grade, there were no classes in Indian painting. Pablita had never gone to school in Santa Clara Pueblo where she had lived... until she was six. Then, she and her sister Rosita had gone together to Santa Fe to attend St. Catherine's Indian School through the sixth grade. "I did not know a word of English until I went there," Pablita says.

However, she evidently acquired vivid impressions of her home pueblo along with the undisturbed learning of her native language during her early formative years; for, despite varied and acculturating experiences which have since greatly widened Pablita's social world, she still reveals in her frank, unaffected personality and her genuinely native art how well she knows and honors the best of Pueblo culture...

In the first annual Indian painting exhibition at the Art Gallery of the Museum of New Mexico, 1933, Pablita and Rosita showed a number of paintings which were thoroughly Pueblo and distinctly feminine. These somewhat representational works depicted such subjects as "Women Baking Bread," "Women Husking Corn," "Girl Winnowing Wheat," "Woman with Olla," "Women Putting on Moccasins," "Firing Pottery,"



Pablita Velarde

and "Mother and Child."

Pablita did her first work in oil in the spring of 1933—a single figure of a Santa Clara girl painted on a long narrow panel for the Indian exhibition at Chicago's Century of Progress. This and a later earthcolor mural qualified her for participation in one of the Works Progress Administration's art projects in the autumn. In these large oil paintings of mural size, Pablita again did semi-naturalistic compositions of potters and corn harvesters in an authentic and capable manner similar to the style of her watercolors. The paintings were warm and meaningful with perhaps as much appeal to the ethnologist as to the artist.

Pablita, the student, had a merry disposition revealed through a provocative sense of humor. This, coupled with her bright, quick observation of everything around her, often made for clever, spontaneous comments on objects and occurrences that ordinarily would appear commonplace. With a word she could brighten a trying or even an exasperating situation. Yet, this trait never influenced her paintings; these were invariably serious. Along with her light-heartedness, Pablita possessed maturity beyond her years. She was independent and not easily influenced—yet she was altogether reasonable. She could be depended upon to carry through to completion any undertaking she considered worthwhile. Obstacles in the routine operations of a big boarding school often stood in the way of her art, but she cheerfully worked at all odd hours to finish her paintings. She had a daring loyalty to the people and principles in which she believed. ■

From "Pablita Velarde: Painter of Pueblo Life," an article that appeared in *El Palacio* Volume 58, Number 11, published November 1952.