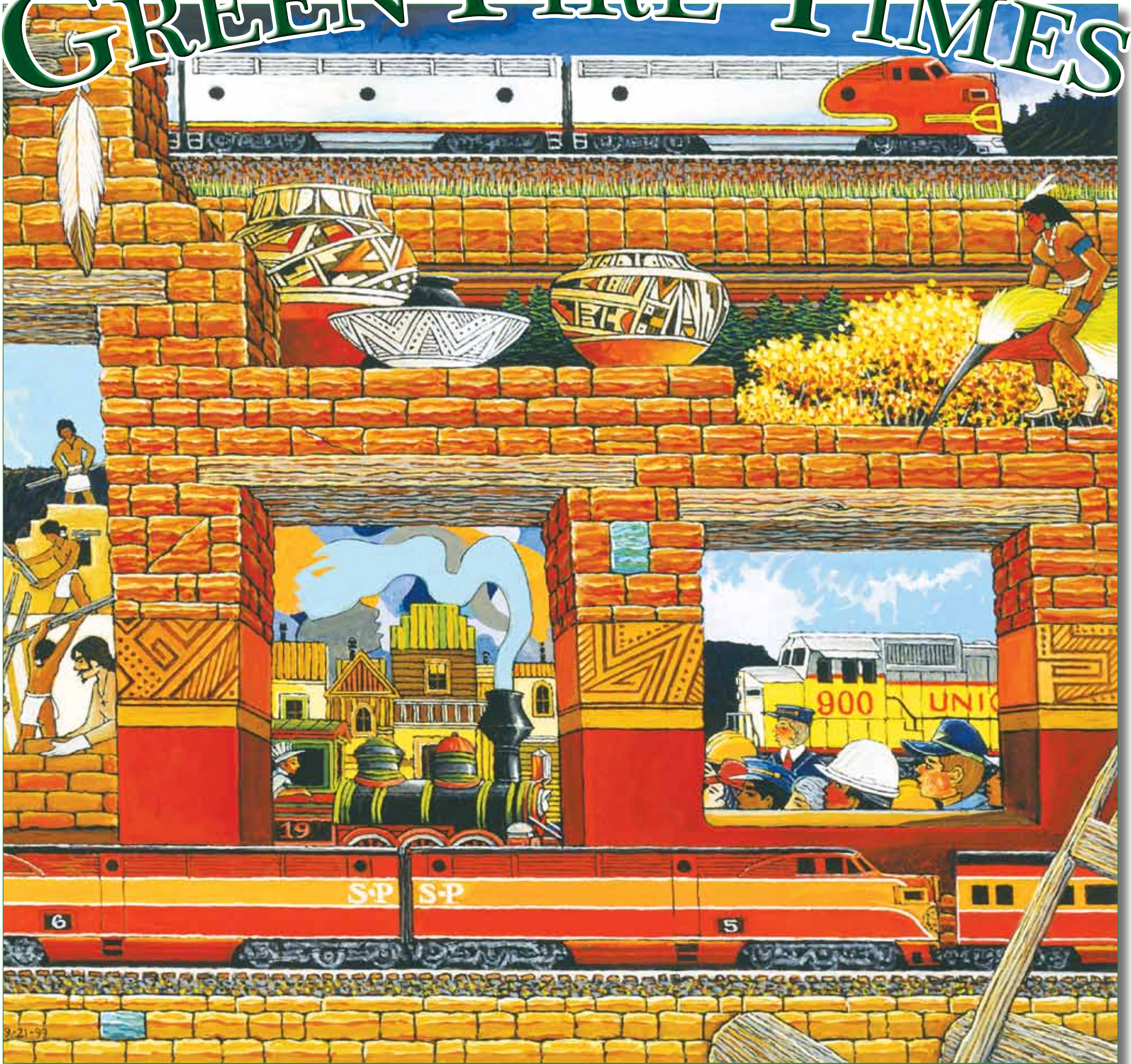


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GREEN FIRE TIMES



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April 2011

Volume 3, Number 4

THE NEW MEXICO FIBER ARTS TRAILS

GROWING BUSINESSES THROUGH CULTURAL TOURISM

MAE COLBURN AND CAROL COOPER

assure “maximum employment among all sectors of society,” encouraging a “sense of independence” among involved communities.¹ The WPA guide was developed in response to the Depression; the Trails just preceded the recent economic downturn. Both hinge upon the idea that the economic health of a region is contingent upon visitors’ support of local enterprises. Yet while the WPA guide introduces visitors to the state at large, the NM Fiber Arts Trails focus on rural regions and the arts (areas and sectors among the hardest hit during the recent economic slump), with the goal of sustaining the arts in rural regions, and sustaining rural regions through the arts.

Weaving refers to the systematic interlacing of warp and weft, *embroidery* to

decorative stitching on a piece of fabric, and *spinning* to the careful drawing out and twisting of fiber into a continuous strand. These techniques also possess metaphorical value. We ‘spin’ tales, ‘weave’ plots, and ‘embroider’ narratives — storytelling is the common thread. Textiles are thus equated with human narratives, and textile production with the ‘fabric of life.’

Artful practitioners of these techniques, and many more, are featured as part of the NM Fiber Arts Trails guide. The following examples — weaving at the Tres Manos Workshop south of Las Cruces, Beatrice Maestas Sandoval’s prizewinning colcha embroidery at the Española Valley Fiber Arts Center, and the work of the



Photo courtesy Ramah Navajo Weavers Association

Navajo pictorial weaving
Ramah Navajo Weavers Association — showcase the diversity of communities and art forms represented in the

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TEXTILES: we sleep between them, wear them next to our skin, drape them over tables, lay them on the floor, and hang them from curtain rods. We live in, on, and around textiles, but seldom question their origin. The New Mexico Fiber Arts Trails, a creative sector entrepreneurship and cultural tourism initiative developed by New Mexico Arts (a division of the Department of Cultural Affairs), help to chronicle the textile supply chain. The guidebook features three trails, or proposed itineraries, and over sixty fiber arts enterprises, including farms, ranches, workshops, artist studios, galleries, and training centers — all in rural areas outside of Santa Fe and Albuquerque. Available online and at tourist destinations throughout the state, the guide invites visitors — and locals — to explore and support the artists and communities that form the fabric of rural NM.

The guide harkens back to New Mexico: A Guide to the Colorful State, the classic NM touring guide first published in 1940 as part of the Work Projects Administration’s (WPA) American Guide Series. Like the NM Fiber Arts Trails, the American Guide Series targeted the “remotest corners of America,” and aimed to

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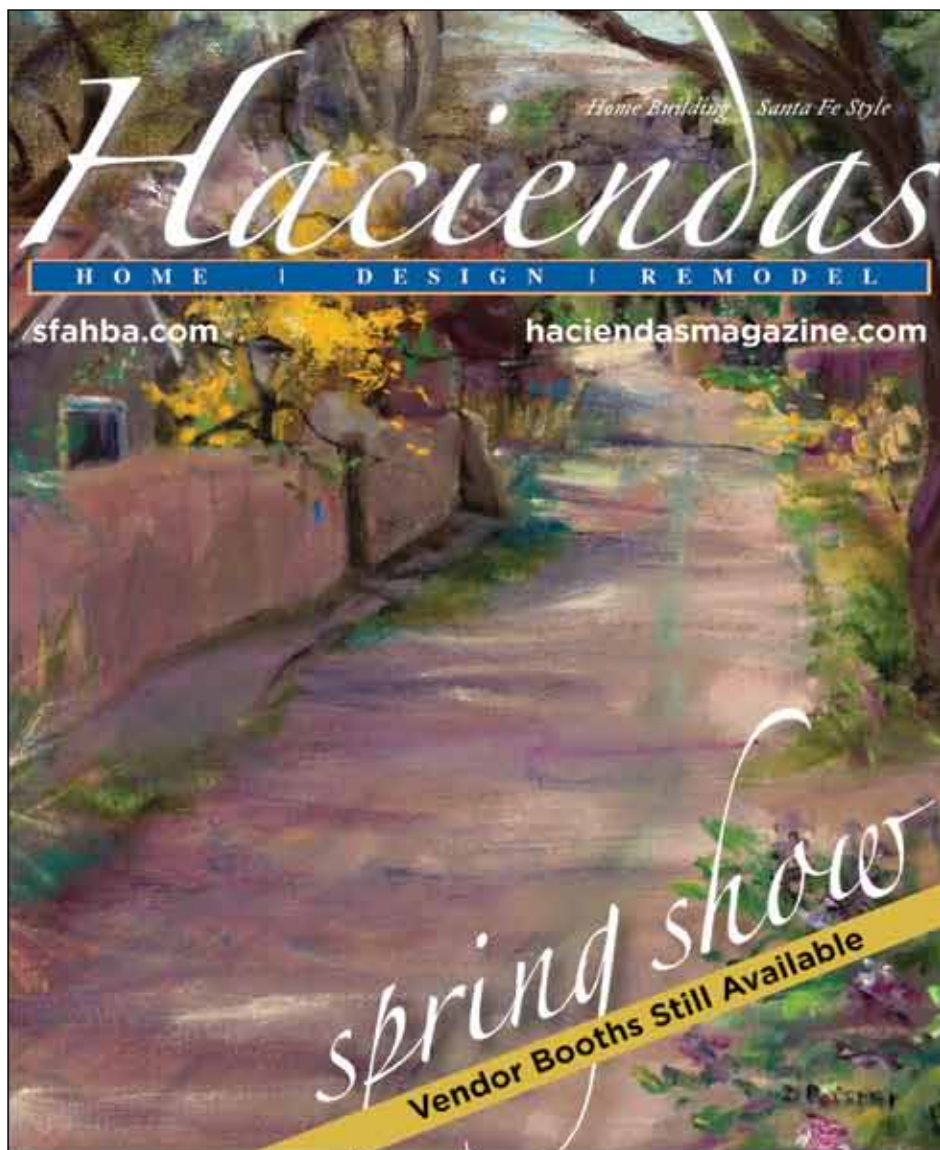
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NM FIBER ARTS CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9



Bob Davis' churro sheep near Española, New Mexico

©Diane Bowman (2)

Trails guide and reveal how textiles shape the social and economic narratives of featured artisans and communities.

Work your way south from Albuquerque on I-25, through Socorro and Truth or Consequences, past the cotton and chile fields south of Las Cruces, until you reach the Tres Manos Workshop in the village of San Miguel. The workshop features contemporary handwoven scarves, shawls, and jackets, each carefully designed and executed by a member of the Tres Manos weavers — and named according to color and fiber type: 'Summer Daisies,' 'Snow White,' 'Rose Mallow,' and 'Blue Flax,' among others. The workshop, which was conceived by the Community Action Agency of Southern NM, aims to help women of the *colonias* achieve sustainable self-employment through sales of their handwoven goods. Participants are trained in personal and business skills, and of course in the fine points of weaving, which serves as both an outlet for creative expression and a means to economic stability.

Travel north on Highway 84/285 to the Enchanted Fiber Gallery at the Española Valley Fiber Arts Center, (www.evfac.org) a hub for fiber artists across northern NM and beyond, to see the work of colcha embroiderer Beatrice Maestas Sandoval (or sign up to take a class from the master herself). *Colcha* was brought to NM and Southern Colorado by Spanish settlers, who carried with them embroidered finery as well as the needles and yarn with which to make it. Sandoval spins and dyes her own yarn before weaving it into *sabanilla*, or loosely-woven wool cloth (the traditional

canvas for colcha) and hand spins her embroidery thread, which she colors with natural dyes: indigo blue, cochineal red, and avocado pit peach. The recipient of numerous awards, Sandoval's work represents technical mastery and a profound reverence for Spanish traditional arts.

Head west on I-40 and south from Grants into ponderosa country to visit the Ramah Navajo Weavers Association at Pine Hill, NM. On site is their *hogan*, the eight-sided Navajo home. Traditionally, weavers created one-of-a-kind Navajo rugs in their own hogans. The Ramah Navajo weavers use locally raised, sheared, washed, handspun and naturally dyed wool from the rare Navajo Churro sheep which the Association reestablished in



Beatrice Sandoval's Colcha at the Española Valley Fiber Arts Center

weavers' flocks in the early 1990s. Their deft hands evince centuries of experience and local wisdom, and the weavers use time-honored processes that have become integral elements of Diné identity. The arts trails grow businesses through cultural tourism. Visitors to these sites invest not only in local artisans and their

work; they invest in the local materials, knowledge, and traditions that make each purchase possible. A tag on a commercially made wool sweater might indicate where it was assembled, but not necessarily where the wool was grown, processed, dyed, knit, and cut. Certain organizations, such as Historic Futures and Sourcemap, are attempting to mend this situation with supply-chain traceability software. Patagonia has used Historic Futures software — aptly known as String — to trace the circuitous routes taken by a number of their products in an initiative they call the “Footprint Chronicles.” Customers can click through a series of maps, images, and testimonials, tracing each item from “design to delivery.” This and similar initiatives are, without a doubt, responses to a general shift toward informed consumption and a growing consumer preference for authentic local goods, but ‘local’ is where large national and multinational organizations run into difficulty. There simply isn’t a way, on a national or multinational scale, to replicate authentic local goods. The NM Fiber Arts Trails bring visitors to the ‘sourcepoint,’ generating income while inherently creating an informed consumer base, and cultivating a sustainable place-based economy. ❁

Visit www.nmfiberarts.org or www.nmarts.org to download a PDF of the NM Fiber Arts Trails guide or brochure. Call 505.827.6490, or in-state 1.800.879.4278 to request a copy by mail.

¹ Writer’s Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of NM. *The WPA Guide to 1930s New Mexico*. Ed. Marc Simmons. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1989.

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(l-r) Carol Cooper and Mae Colburn

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