

A CENTURY OF ART & CULTURE

One of the great art destinations in Santa Fe, La Fonda on the Plaza, celebrates its centennial.

By John O'Hern

Art has been at the center of Santa Fe's La Fonda on the Plaza since it opened its doors in 1922. Through different owners and redesigns the original art has been maintained and the hotel's collection has grown in size and importance.

Designed by Isaac Rapp with a mixture of Pueblo and Spanish Colonial elements, it was acquired by the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, then leased to the Fred Harvey Company, which ran it as a Harvey House for four decades. The Harvey Company hired John Gaw Meem (1894-1983) and Mary Elizabeth Jane Colter (1869-1958) to perform a major redesign. Art literally began to be part of La Fonda's fabric with terra-cotta bas-reliefs and painted wall murals. The railroad had commissioned Gerald Cassidy (1879-1934) to create paintings that could be reproduced to promote travel to the Southwest in railroad stations across the country. Cassidy's original paintings have been restored and hang throughout the hotel.

In the book *From Every Window: A Glimpse of the Past*, chronicling the history of La Fonda, Barbara J. Harrelson notes that Colter brought her interest in working with local artists and craftspeople to the project in Santa Fe. "Special touches include handcrafted chandeliers, tin and copper lighting fixtures, and colorful tiles and textiles," Harrelson writes. "Handcarved, handpainted furniture and other ornamentation by local artists add individual character and charm."

The large terra-cotta panel above the fireplace in the Portal is one of Arnold Rönnebeck's major contributions to the décor of La Fonda. Rönnebeck (1885-1947) incorporated symbols and characters from Zuni and Hopi tribal stories, many of which can be seen again throughout the hotel in the work of other artists.



La Fonda on the Plaza in
Santa Fe, New Mexico.







1

The Portal is just outside La Fonda's restaurant, La Plazuela, which was once an open plaza. In the doors around La Plazuela are some of the 400 glass panes painted by Ernest Martinez, an employee at the hotel for more than 50 years.

La Fonda's art collection began during the hotel's earliest days. The property has grown considerably since Sam and Ethel Ballen bought the hotel in 1968.

The couple continued the tradition of showcasing Native art, supporting local artisans and Santa Fe's famed *Indian Market*, acquiring work by Native American and other artists for the hotel. This tradition continues today, with acquisitions of work by contemporary Native American artists such as Mateo Romero, Marla Allison and Tony Abeyta signaling the future direction of collecting at La Fonda.

1. Marla Allison (Laguna), Ryan Singer (Navajo) and Mateo Romero (Cochiti) collaborated on *Rio Grande Pueblo Girl*, 2009, acrylic on wood. It consists of three paintings (one by each of the artists). Each painting is made up of 32 square panels which the artists move around from time to time and from painting to painting.
2. Marla Allison (Laguna), *Cottonwood and Deer*, 2010, acrylic on canvas



2



3

3. A bedroom in the recently redesigned Terrace Inn with a headboard woven in a geometric pattern derived from a Navajo chief's blanket. On the right is a painting by Shonto Begay (Navajo).
4. Arnold Rönnebeck's (1885-1947) terra-cotta panel in the Portal incorporates symbols and characters from Zuni and Hopi tribal stories, many of which can be seen again throughout the hotel in the work of other artists.
5. Two of the more than 400 glass panes painted by Ernest Martinez for La Plazuela and other locations in the hotel.



5

The practice of commissioning and collecting original art begun by the railroad and continued by the Ballens provides an exceptional experience for hotel guests and visitors alike. Not only does original artwork hang in every room but all of it has a connection to the people who designed, built, and owned the hotel, a collaboration that has made La Fonda a sought-after destination for 100 years.

Jenny Kimball, a longtime friend of the Ballens, became chair of the board at La Fonda in 2007. In 2008, she brought in architect Barbara Felix to plan and begin a wholesale renovation of the hotel. In 2014, she and a group of investors purchased the hotel from the Ballen family. The rest, as they say, is history.

She recently commented on the renovation. "The completion of the Terrace Inn represents the culmination of a multiphased renovation project that began in 2007 with the goal of bringing all of our guest rooms and public spaces up to a new standard

of luxury and comfort, while preserving the rich heritage that has sustained this landmark for 100 incredible years. Because La Fonda on the Plaza is a major art destination, we made sure to incorporate original artwork in every



4

guest room and suite on our luxury level. The upgraded rooms allow guests to interact with art in a very tactile way—guests can appreciate the handwoven texture of the gorgeous Navajo chief blankets that wrap each headboard, and interact with the transparent sheers featuring the rich color palette of Diné textiles and inspired by a triptych we commissioned from the talented Crow artist Del Curfman."

During the renovation, Felix continually asked "What would Mary do?" when it came time to make decisions about various design elements. Colter's vision for La Fonda is thus more alive today than it has been for generations.

Her handpainted headboards had mostly been relegated to storage. Felix found enough remnants to engage 10 artists to paint new headboards for the renovated guest rooms. Among the artists was Brian Vallo, who would become director of the Indian Arts Research Center at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe, and is now governor of the Pueblo of Acoma.

Diné artist Tony Abeyta recalls visiting the hotel to look at the art with his family when he was 9 years old. In the book, *La Fonda: Then and Now*, he writes, "It's hard not to feel that La Fonda has always been in Santa Fe. Its legacy is inextricably tied not only to yesteryear but to a creative journey documented by the many famous artists who have walked through

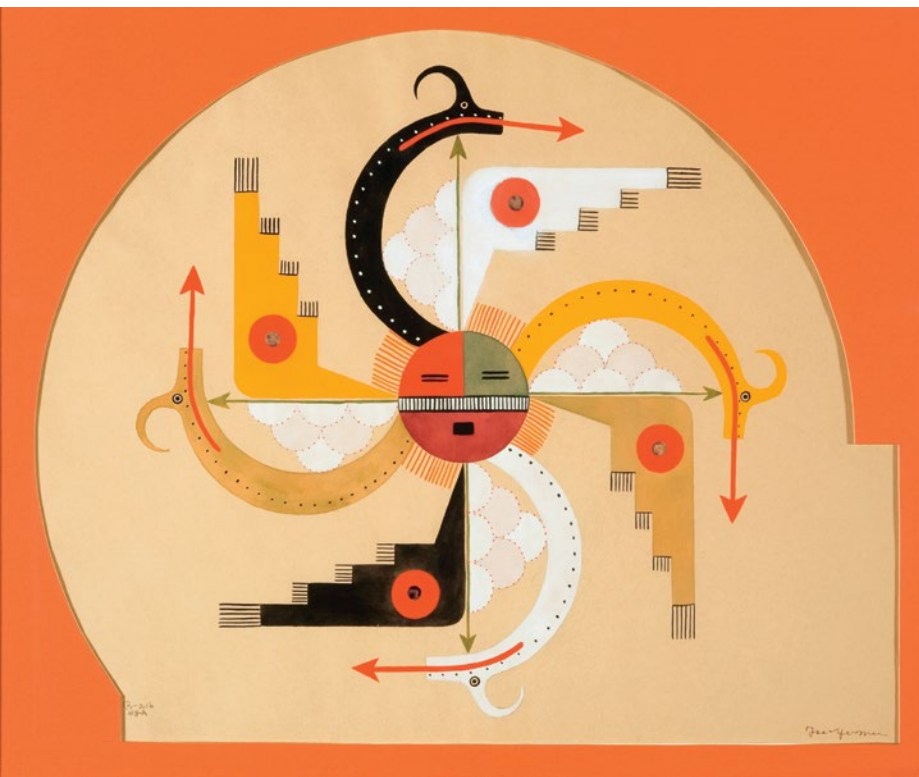
6. *Stormy Canyon* by Tony Abeyta (Navajo) was commissioned by La Fonda and hangs in an alcove of the hotel. He was designated a 2012 Museum of Indian Arts and Culture Living Treasure.

7. An untitled tempera on paper by Romando Vigil (1902-1978). Vigil's style includes realism and abstraction. He was commissioned to create murals for the 1933 Exhibition of Indian Tribal Arts at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., and for Mesa Verde National Park.

All images courtesy La Fonda



6



7

its doors. The hotel's thick walls, the large vaulted viga-and-corbel ceilings, the murals, and the unique carved-pine furnishings with red cushions all establish a perfect setting for some very wonderful works of art that have found a permanent home there."

Abeyta's own art now graces the corridors of La Fonda as well as the new suites of the Terrace Inn.

La Fonda is the "go-to" place for people who come to Santa Fe for its museums and its major art festivals including Southwestern Association for Indian Arts' (SWAIA) *Santa Fe Indian Market*, the *Traditional Spanish Market* and the *International Folk Art Market*. It also hosts shows of contemporary Native art in its ballrooms and partners with *Sovereign Santa Fe*, which highlights cutting edge Indigenous creativity.

The hotel will kick off its centenary year with the *Centennial Gala* on January 22, 2022.

January 22, 2022

La Fonda on the Plaza Centennial Gala

100 E. San Francisco Street, Santa Fe, NM 87501

(310) 433-9626, www.lafondasantafe.com