

**Commentary on
"Straddling the Cultural Fence"
by Edwin L. Wade**

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Edwin L. Wade's commentary "Straddling the Cultural Fence: the Conflict for Ethnic Artists within Pueblo Societies" discusses the damaging effects of artistic commercialization on Southwestern Native American cultures during the 20th century.

Many traditional Pueblo peoples perceived a huge sacrilege in the portrayal of sacred Native American religious observances and symbols in artistic objects to be sold to non-Natives. They believed this cheapened the ceremonial foundation of the society, and was an affront to the supernatural beings with whom the Pueblo peoples shared a mutually beneficial relationship that brought order and harmony to their world. Such a violation of social mores led, on occasion, to accusations of witchcraft and other antisocial behaviors against those artists who produced works for sale to the outside world.

The anguish produced by such events is surely similar to the emotions of a devout Christian upon seeing the desecration of a Crucifix or hearing of the celebration of a so-called "Black Mass" by a group of Satanists, or those of an Orthodox Jew at violence directed against the Star of David.

On the other hand, the rising pre-eminence of certain individual Native American artists threatened the very fabric of Pueblo society. This society, like many other non-Western societies, has as a foundation the well being of the group over any individual. As the white collectors began to seek out specific artists like Maria Martinez, the group identity of the society was threatened. These artists, in return, often succumbed to the lure of increased riches and began to behave in a non-communal, individualistic and anti-social way. Carried to an extreme, as happened upon occasion at Tesuque Pueblo, the success of a single artist depended on the failure of others, threatening their egalitarian society.

Unfortunately, market forces must be reckoned with, and the Pueblos eventually evolved ways and means to deal with the onslaught of white man's ways on their society. Many, if not most, of the objects sold "outside" today are not exact replicas of sacred ceremonial objects, but rather are simplified or modified in some way to both accommodate non-native tastes and avoid further offending the spirits. Additionally, some of the better-known Pueblo artists have expanded their work from individual effort into cottage industries employing other family members, so that more individuals can benefit from the reputation of one. Even more importantly, those family members not directly involved in artistic production have taken over other roles, including acting as liaisons with the outside world, recreating a symbiotic society in a changed form better equipped to deal with modern reality.