

# The Taylor Memorial Chapel

John Gaw Meem (1894-1983), noted architect from Santa Fe who also designed the award-winning Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, was commissioned by Alice Bemis Taylor to design a chapel for La Foret, the Taylor summer home in the Black Forest. The chapel, built in the style of the adobe missions of the southwest, reflects Mrs. Taylor's deep interest in southwestern art and architecture. Completed in 1929, it was dedicated in memory of her husband, Frederick Morgan Pike Taylor.

To compliment the basic building design, Mrs. Taylor commissioned Santa Fe artist, Eugenie Shonnard (1886-1978), to design and execute all the interior woodwork for the chapel—altar, lectern, pulpit, candlesticks, candelabra, the chancel railings, two sixteen-foot archway decorations, and the twenty-foot high reredos. Every piece of pine was antiqued and the carved ornament partly polychromed. This tremendous task was done with the assistance of only a carpenter and the artist's husband, an enthusiastic but unskilled helper.

Ms. Shonnard's staunch advocacy of the integration of figurative and ornamental sculpture with architecture has resulted in the magnificent blend of two of the southwest's pre-eminent artists. Of her work, Eugenie Shonnard once said, "God created form and color in this world. Also he gave some of us talents for the use of these; therefore, we human beings must need them in our lives. There is no other answer! We artists must fulfill life's commission as artists!"

## The Santos in the Reredos

### #1 Our Lady of Guadalupe/Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe

The legend of Guadalupe is celebrated in Mexico and refers to the appearance of Mary to a Mexican Indian, Juan Diego, in 1531 on the sacred site of the Aztec goddess, Tonantzin.

Mary told him to tell the Mexican bishop to build a church where she stood. The bishop did not believe the story. Later, Mary appeared again and, as a sign, told the peasant to gather roses behind a rock. When he took the roses in his cloak to the bishop, a picture of the Virgin miraculously appeared on the cloth. A shrine and eventually a magnificent church were built on the spot where she first appeared. The cloak on which her image appeared is enshrined in Mexico City.

She wears a crown and a red dress covered by a blue cloak with gold stars and trim. She is characterized by dark skin and Indian features. Surrounded by a body halo, she stands on a dark, up-turned crescent supported by an angel, and her hands are folded. She aids against sickness and all evil, especially war. Our Lady of Guadalupe is the patroness of Mesoamerica and the southwestern United States, the Mexican and Indian peoples.

### #2 Saint Rita of Cascia / Santa Rita de Casia

Saint Rita (1386-1456) was a widow who late in life entered the Augustinian convent at Cascia, Italy. There she lived a life of ascetic penance and meditation and is said to have received the stigmata upon her forehead, which is often depicted in images of her. She holds a crucifix and a skull as her attributes and wears a nun's habit. For the many miracles attributed to her intercession, she is venerated in Spain as *la Abogada de los imposibles*, the helper in impossible situations.

### #3 Saint Raphael the Archangel / San Rafael Arcangel

Saint Raphael is the third archangel to be mentioned by name in the canonical scriptures. His name in Hebrew means *God has healed*. In the Book of Tobias he was the traveling companion and protector of Tobias in his journey to find a miraculous fish which would cure his father's blindness. Raphael was successful in restoring the sight of Tobias' father, and as Physician of God he is accorded a merciful and restorative function, being invoked for eye and other ailments, and for insuring a safe journey. He wears a pilgrim's garb, carries a staff and fish. A gourd for water is attached to the staff.

Raphael is the patron saint of travelers, guide of pilgrims, and protector of spiritual and physical health, especially health of the eyes. He also protects against monsters.

### #4 Saint Rosalia of Palermo/Santa Rosalia de Palermo

Saint Rosalia was a Sicilian of noble birth who left home at a young age to live the life of a hermit and ascetic in a cave in the mountains near Palermo. There she died about 1160. According to a Sicilian legend, many years after her death, she saved Palermo from a plague. By 1237, churches were dedicated to her and she became the patron of all of Sicily. Her veneration was adopted by the Basilian order in Sicily and perhaps through them spread to Spain. She is usually depicted wearing a brown, black or gray robe, with long hair, usually holding a skull, and carrying a Greek cross or a distaff and sometimes a book or a scourge. She may be crowned with roses. She is the patroness of Sicily; protectress against plague; patroness of engaged couples; probably patroness of penance with a Penitente interest.

### #5 Our Lady of Sorrows / Nuestra Senora de los Dolores

This is Mary enduring the sorrows predicted in Luke 2:35: "And the sword will pierce through your own soul also." She is mourning the suffering and crucifixion of Christ. In New Mexico she plays an important role in Holy Week observances. Mary is depicted standing with hands folded, a sword (sometimes seven swords representing the seven sorrows she suffered during Jesus' lifetime) piercing her heart. She is wearing a red dress and a dark blue or black cloak or shawl and a cowl. Sometimes a tear or seven tears are seen falling on her cheek. Infrequently, as in this case, she is crowned. She offers strength in suffering, compassion for others in sorrow, help in childbirth, with children and sinners. There is a definite Penitente interest since it is usually the Dolores who engages in the Encuentro as Christ moves toward Calvary. She is the patroness of Mexico and Hispanics in the United States.

### #6 Saint Joseph / San Jose Patriarca

The story is that at the time of Mary's betrothal a number of eligible suitors were asked to bring a staff to the temple, for it was believed that her destined spouse would be the one whose staff flowered. Though not expected, it was the rod of Joseph which bloomed and



upon which the Holy Spirit appeared as a dove. Traditionally, Joseph was a carpenter. In Spanish-American folk art, Joseph is shown as a virile young man with long, flowing dark hair and dark beard, holding the Nino, wearing a brightly colored and

often intricately patterned robe. As in this depiction, he is sometimes crowned, and he often carries a flowering staff. The flowering staff of Joseph is also a symbol of the coming of the Christ.

He is the patron of happy death (since Christ traditionally was said to have been with him), of fathers, families, carpenters, and all workers.

### #7 Saint Lawrence / San Lorenzo

Saint Lawrence, traditionally of Spanish birth, was a deacon in the service of the pope who was martyred by Valerian in 258 A.D. by being burned on a gridiron. Veneration of Saint Lawrence dates to the fourth century, and he has been depicted in Christian art since the Middle Ages. He is depicted wearing the deacon's dalmatic (vestment), usually tonsured and beardless, holding the martyr's palm and a gridiron, symbol of his death by fire. He sometimes holds a book, chalice or a cross. He is the protector against fire, patron of crops during August, and patron of the poor. He is the patron saint of the Pueblo of Picuris where his feast day is still celebrated.

## NOTES

*Reredos in Chapel at La Foret* is a little pamphlet that Alice Bemis Taylor gave to her La Foret guests in the 1930s. Copies of the pamphlet were reproduced and distributed by the Rocky Mountain Conference of the United Church of Christ. It must be remembered that extensive research on Christian images in southwestern culture was begun decades after the Bemis-Taylor Chapel was built. This explains how a woman with Mrs. Taylor's keen interest and extensive knowledge of the field could have misrepresented five of the seven *santos* in the altar screen. The detailed information that would have allowed accurate identification simply did not exist.

In the belief that Mrs. Taylor would want today's guests to have the advantage of current scholarship, this document is offered as a supplement to her original pamphlet. In addition to a conversation with Father Thomas Steele, S.J., the following references were drawn upon:

Cash, Marie Romero, *Santos: Enduring Images of Northern New Mexican Village Churches*, Niwot, CO, University Press of Colorado, 1999.

*Legends of the Saints* from *The Docent Manual*, Colorado Springs, CO, The Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, 1996.

Steele, Thomas J., S.J., *Santos and Saints*, Santa Fe, NM, Ancient City Press, 1982.

Wroth, Will, *Christian Images in Hispanic New Mexico*, Colorado Springs, CO, Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, 1982.

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