

# Mel Rivera: Santa Fe, New Mexico

## *Traditional Encrusted Straw*



The art of straw appliqué on wood is an ancient craft that was practiced in North Africa before its introduction into Spain by the Moors in the 18th century. The art form was then adopted by Spanish artisans who carried it on and passed on the art to the artists in the New World. In the upper Rio Grande Valley, the craft, one of several unique to the New Mexico region, was used as a practical substitute for the more elaborate wood and mother-of-pearl inlay. Straw decorations were seen on boxes, wooden candle holders, picture moldings and devotional wooden crosses that had been stained black. The stain and intricate surface design of fine-cut dried wheat straw, or corn husks were affixed onto the woodwork using a mixture of pine

pitch and soot. The art flourished in the Rio Grande Valley in Spanish Colonial territorial times, but was abandoned in the late 19th century.

Artist Mel Rivera is among several artists helping to revive the lost art of straw appliqué on crosses, boxes and retablos. He made his first straw appliqué cross in 1985, using only wheat straws which are especially difficult to work with. Mel continues to create new designs using only the core of the straw plant which is what makes his straw appliqué work so unique. Mel cultivates his own wheat straw, letting some of the stalks weather into a deep golden hue, which he prefers for his floral designs. He also popularized the pueblo step design and the bear fetish in his work.

Over the past twenty years, Mel Rivera has won countless awards at the New Mexico State Fair and the Spanish Market in Santa Fe including placing 2nd in 2008 at both markets. In 2009, at Tesoro's market he won 1st Place in the Hispanic Arts category. And last year he won Best in show at Tesoro's Spanish Colonial Market.

