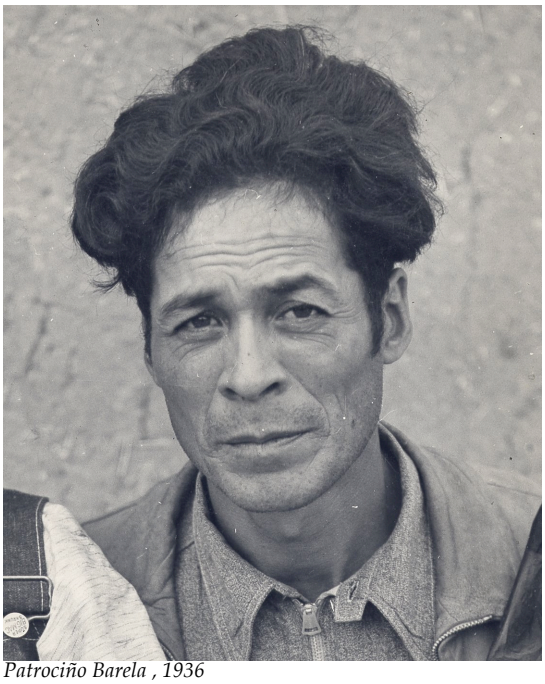
PEYTON
WRIGHT

237 East Palace Avenue
Santa Fe, NM 87501

800 879-8898
505 989-9888
505 989-9889 Fax
info@peytonwright.com



Patrociño Barela , 1936
Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division Collection

Patrociño Barela

(ca. 1900 – 1964)

An integral figure in twentieth-century Hispanic and New Mexican art history, Patrociño Barela rose to art world celebrity in the 1930s, an unlikely prospect for someone of his background.

Barela's date of birth is unclear, but is estimated to be between 1900 and 1904. Barela did not attend school for more than a few weeks and never learned to read or write.

He had left home at age eleven following the death of his mother and sister to travel around the Southwest in search of work. He worked as a steelworker, miner, on the railway, as a farmhand, and as a unionized carpenter. In 1930, he married a widow and eventually with her had three more children (giving them seven in total).

Asked to reconstruct a damaged wooden bulto (a devotional carving) of San Antonio, he later recounted that he knew that someone was going to make 20 dollars from repaired carving and that he was promised five. Although the five dollars never appeared, Barela realized that his work had value and he continued to make figures.

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His prodigious output soon caught the eye of Russell Vernon Hunter, artist and New Mexico state director of the WPA, who signed Barela up for the Federal Art Project (FAP). By the summer of 1936 Barela's sculptures were on display at the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe, and in September of that year they appeared in *New Horizons in American Art* at MoMA. In the wake of the exhibition, *Time* magazine named Barela its "Discovery of the Year."

Barela's bultos are motivated by his own metaphysical relationship to Christianity. In showing religious subjects through an abstracted style, he intended for his works to provoke the viewer's imagination into entering a spiritually symbolic vision. Central to his vision is a tension between the recalcitrance of wood and the animated dynamism of his subjects.

Although some of his work is on religious themes, he rejected the label of Santero since he did not create art specifically for religious purposes; the majority of his output was secular. He examined all aspects of the human condition with an emphasis on relationships within the family. Stylistically his sculpture has affinities to both 11th Century Romanesque and 20th Century expressionism.

Barela died in an overnight fire at his home studio in Cañon, near Taos, New Mexico at the age of 62.

Biographical sources include National Gallery of Art (Nicholas Miller); Harwood Museum of Art; Smithsonian Archives of American Art