

Sean Wells brings ‘Saints & Sinners’ to the Gallup Sun

Written by By Beth Blakeman Associate Editor
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Sean Wells, a fifth generation Spanish Colonial artist and Day of the Dead artist is bringing her talents to the *Gallup Sun* with contributions once a month.

Wells, who grew up in Santa Fe, says she never thought of art as a professional career. “I always loved math and art. I saw the struggle of Santa Fe artists, the very successful fine artists and struggling artists, and then there were the Spanish Market artists — for me that was a great source of cultural pride for my family and for myself, but I still didn’t think of it as a profession for myself,” Wells said.

So she went to college and earned a degree in architecture, but returned to her family roots when the economy crashed in 2008 and she, her husband and two babies were living on credit cards in California.

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That's when her husband suggested they return to New Mexico.

Being back with her mother and brother, raising her babies, she began to rethink things.

She began helping her brother, who does tinwork and displayed at the Spanish Market every year. Then he suggested she get into the market, too.

"As soon as I started studying with a master artist, learning the backstory—you can't help but connect with the saint stories of suffering and survival, of courage and heroism," she explained.

"I have no gift for the family craft of tinwork," she said. "My grandmother suggested retablos."

Wells decided creating retablos was something she could do at home while she was taking care of her children and even pay some bills.

Wells defines a retablo as a two-dimensional wood board prepared with hand-made gesso and painted with regionally found pigments. It typically features images of Catholic Saints or Bible stories. It can be displayed in a chapel or in a home.

In other descriptions, they are said to show saints, Jesus or the Virgin Mary in large paintings, often made on tin, which were hung behind altars in Catholic churches.

"My brother would frame my retablos in tinwork ... brother and sister collaborating in two different complementary artforms," Wells explained. "My brother and I had a blast. It was really very healing for me at a time when I had no dignity left. I had gone out into the world and completely failed.

"It was an unpredicted and life transforming event."

FIVE GENERATIONS OF ART

Wells grew up surrounded by a family of artisans. Her grandmother is a third generation tinsmith. Two of her children and several brothers practice tinwork. Her family includes five generations of Spanish Colonial artists.

Her great grandfather's shop was located on Delgado Street on Canyon Road.

Even friends became part of Sean Wells as a growth industry.

"When we first moved to New Mexico, a distant relative [her husband's sister's husband's brother and his wife] owned Southwest Wines and Spirits. They were toying with the idea of using a Day of the Dead beer label," Wells told the *Sun* Oct. 14.

"They approached us," she said. "I did some research and came up with some concepts."

"We came up with a round of beer [labels]. Two hundred 40 million cases were sold around the world in a single year," Wells said.

Another distributor now still sells beer with those labels in Albuquerque.

That was followed with the idea of labels for wine bottles. Wells decided to create a Day of the Dead wedding scene for the wines. Seven different images were released including a bride and groom, mariachis, a best man, an officiant with a papal hat [limited edition], bridesmaids, a wedding singer and a mother of the bride. People were collecting all the parts of the scene.

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Then the lottery people saw the wine bottles and in 2015 and 2016 she designed scratchers. The first series of scratchers she designed won a first place national award.

Wells says art has turned into an amazing career for her. She believes that the universe was telling her that if she created art, she would be rewarded.

"Half the time I'm doing traditional retablos," she said. "Colorful skeletons, my saints and my sinners. It's all about healing."

"In such a divisive time ... the common [thing is the] human spirit. Nothing is more foundational to all of us than the skeleton, moving to unification and understanding," Wells said. "The things on the outside are superficial."

You can see her retablo painting tv show Mondays at 5 pm on Comcast Ch. 27 and 929HD.

Her website is: www.Etsy.com/shop/SeanWellsCreates

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