



Museum of
SPANISH
COLONIAL ART

PRESS RELEASE

Paul Pletka: Converging Faiths in the New World

An original exhibition April 12–October 20, 2019



Santa Fe—A trip to Mexico in the 1980s redirected artist Paul Pletka’s vision, producing a decades-long burst of paintings that melded Indigenous peoples, Catholic rituals, and the lifeways of Spanish colonists. His neo-surrealistic style results in graphic layers of masks, icons, villagers, chapels—a unique vision of the way people from different cultures clash, resist, meld, and persist. On April 12, the Museum of Spanish Colonial Art premieres Paul Pletka: Converging Faiths in the New World. The solo exhibition features more than a dozen of Pletka’s paintings (some of them quite large), along with examples of Indigenous and Spanish artifacts that inspire him, from his own collection and the museum’s.

The exhibition represents the first solo museum show of Pletka’s work in New Mexico since 1990. It includes more than a dozen of his highly detailed paintings—some of which stretch wider than 10 feet—sculpture, and Mexican masks from his collection, and artifacts from the museum’s collection, including a historic death cart. The exhibit focuses exclusively on his art about Mexico and the Southwest, including a little-known treasure. While he’s best known for his large acrylic paintings, Pletka has quietly rendered a small body of intimate watercolors depicting New Mexico churches. Borrowed from private collectors for this occasion, his paintings demonstrate how people of different cultures found their way to accepting one another while holding fast to their roots.

“I want visitors to understand that, in the case of these paintings, when two cultures meet, like they did with Spanish Catholics and the indigenous population of Mexico, that there is room for accommodation and that, over time, each culture will evolve itself and take on aspects of the other culture,” Pletka says. “These paintings, in my mind, are positive. They show that things can work out—even if it’s slow.”

Raised on the Western slope of Colorado and based in Santa Fe since the late 1970s, Pletka considers himself an interpreter of the cultures he has personally witnessed and painstakingly researched. That interpretation encompasses a dream world that blends Mexican mysticism with his own ancestral memory; of his father’s Western pioneer family and his Polish mother’s Catholic roots. “I grew up hearing the stories of my father’s family and their interactions with Native culture,” he says. “But it wasn’t until I visited Mexico in 1981 that all these influences of family and heritage, of indigenous and Catholic ritual and religion came together visually. The colors, the gorgeously and ornately decorated churches and cathedrals, the rich heritage of mural art, and the fact that indigenous costumes and rituals could be witnessed right on the street captivated me.”

Pletka's works are avidly collected and held by museums across the nation. Last year, the monograph Paul Pletka: Imagined Wests (University of Oklahoma Press), featuring over 150 of his works, won awards for best art book and best in show at the New Mexico–Arizona Book Awards.

Josef Díaz, acting director of the Museum of Spanish Colonial Art and co-curator of the exhibition with Jana Gottshalk, said the subject matter and exquisite quality of Pletka's work inspired the show. "Paul gives this great, intentional look into life in New Mexico—the lives of the penitents, the churches," he said. "It opens a dialogue about the cultures and their blending. People will come in and ask questions and talk—and that's what art is supposed to do."

Media Contacts

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