

# impact



## Painting the Penitentes





*The scarring rite performed in Official Seal of the Order, above, was given to each initiate. Beginning the Procession represents taking the crosses down from the morada preparatory to a procession.*



Photographs by Dick Kettlewell

# Painting the Penitentes

By TRICIA HURST

*A New Mexico doctor's remarkable works of religious art have finally come out of storage.*

**F**or 45 years, Isaac Lawrence Udell was a small town physician with a big heart and a nearly hidden talent. After a childhood in Michigan, Colorado and Raton, N.M., where his parents ran a bakery, Udell arrived in Taos in 1924. He was 20 years old and a chiropractor by education. Because Northern New Mexico needed physicians and because Udell had briefly attended medical school

in Colorado, the state permitted him to practice medicine.

And practice he did. People came from three surrounding states to see kindly and gentle Doc Udell. Often his patients checked into local motels and simply waited their turn.

Udell's story, which has been told before, is a classic one: Patients paid him whatever they could (eggs, chickens, even a horse once), and whenever they could (sometimes never).





*After arriving at Calvario, Penitentes prostrated themselves before the cross while prayers were read and chants were sung.*



## Udell befriended the Penitentes and treated them in his office. In turn, the Penitentes allowed him to witness their extremely private rituals.

Yet there is another, special side to Udell's story that has seldom been told. A big, white-haired, teddy bear of a man, Udell possessed an avocation that nearly equaled in passion his need to care for people: Painting the stages of the Penitente ritual.

Udell was mostly a self-taught artist. During his early years in Taos, he developed a primitive painting style all his own. After he gained the trust of Indians and Hispanics in the area, he began to paint them. The Penitentes, a secretive religious group involved in Holy Week ceremonies that included self-flagellation and even crucifixion, especially intrigued him.

Udell befriended the Penitentes and treated them in his office. In turn, the Penitentes allowed him to witness their extremely private rituals in the isolated villages of Northern New Mexico.

During the 1930s, Udell completed 13 large paintings of the Penitentes. A few years later, he sold the paintings to Helene Wurlitzer, a wealthy woman who lived in Taos part of the year. After Mrs. Wurlitzer's death in 1963, the paintings became the property of the Wurlitzer Foundation, a Taos organization that supports the arts. The foundation maintains, near downtown Taos, an adobe retreat center for writers, artists, musicians, choreographers and others in the creative arts.

For many years, the paintings remained at the Wurlitzer Foundation. Some of the paintings hung on display, but most were kept in storage. Many years ago, Udell's Penitente works went on tour in this country and Europe. Yet because the Wurlitzer Foundation is not open to the public, the paintings for the most part remained unknown.

Udell did other paintings, and some now reside in private collections. He enjoyed sitting at his easel, his method of relaxation from a frantic life. Not only did he maintain a busy medical practice, but after his marriage broke up, Udell also reared his five children almost single-handedly.

A modest man, Udell did not aspire to display his work in the galleries of Taos, a town of artists. Nor did he seek criticism

or applause. Yet his work is alive with the truth of his portrayal of human faith and experience.

He was deeply religious in his own way: He worshiped the land, the earth and the great outdoors. But most important, he was sensitive to his subject matter, aware and respectful of the sacredness of the Penitente Brotherhood.

He once wrote of the Penitentes: "I can ask only, at the expense of appearing sentimental, that the story of the Penitente Brotherhood be received with understanding, charity and human kindness, in return for a knowledge of a people whose heritage is rich in bravery and daring, whose faith is deep and unquestioning, and whose conviction is sure."

THE NEW MEXICO Penitentes that Doc Udell painted have a history that can be traced to the late 1700s.

At that time in the Southwest, there was an insufficient number of clergy for the Spanish settlers here. In the absence of priests or friars, colonists were left to their own means of worship. Some chose to emulate the lives of the saints and the Passion of Christ, and soon founded their own order: *Los Hermanos Penitentes*, or the Penitent Brothers. The Penitentes, as the members of the Brotherhood are commonly referred to, still exist in areas of the Southwest.

The Brotherhood that Doc Udell came to know, practiced, with some modifications and variations, the Passion of Christ during the days of Lent. There was nothing new in their practices that Udell saw. Self-flagellation had been used for centuries as atonement for sin. At one time in history, self-flagellation was a privilege permitted only to martyrs, godly men and kings.

The members of the Brotherhood who practiced the ritual were neither a segregated clan nor class. They were the descendants of the Spanish colonists who brought a culture to the New World at a time when Spain was at the height of her wealth, power and glory.

Udell found the Penitentes to be normal men who had normal occupations: ranch-

ers, sheepherders, storekeepers, mechanics, clerks, teachers. They lived, he discovered, common, everyday existences. Only during Lent, a time for penance and atonement for wrongdoing, were they in evidence as *Los Hermanos Penitentes*.

Their processions were once public. But with the advent of the Anglo, especially the "touring American public," the Penitentes began to suffer criticism for their practices, which many outsiders considered harsh. Over the years, the Penitentes withdrew more and more. Their rituals became closely guarded secrets.

There was a time when the Catholic Church frowned upon the Brotherhood. However, most priests worked out with their Penitente parishioners an acceptable relationship. Then, in 1947, by decree of Archbishop Edwin V. Byrne, all Penitentes were recognized by the church with one stipulation: that their practices become less severe.

DOC UDELL'S PAINTINGS capture the full range of the Brotherhood's Holy Week activities from beginning to end.

His *Official Seal of the Order* shows an aspiring initiate receiving three cross-hatched cuts on each side of his spine. The rite was usually performed by the *sangrador*, the bloodletter. The cutting was usually done with a piece of flint or obsidian, not sharp enough to cut too deeply, but to cut broadly, leaving a "good" scar. The Penitente wore this scar much as a lodge member might wear a pin in the lapel of his coat, although it was rarely, if ever, seen.

*Beginning the Procession* depicts members taking down the crosses from a *morada*, or Brotherhood house, in preparation for beginning a ceremony. The crosses, each weighing between 300 and 800 pounds, were cut in late February or early March when the sap began to rise. The processions of the Penitentes occurred at almost any time of the day or night during Lent. The procession wound its way from the *morada* to *Calvario*, a cross usually located on a hill, or to the nearest *campo santo*, or cemetery, where the pilgrims stopped before each grave to offer prayers.

In many Penitente processions, one of the brothers dragged the *carreta del muerto*, or death cart. The Penitentes often had loaded the carts with stones. And atop the stones rode *La Muerte*, death herself, a carved skeleton draped in black and carrying a bow with a red-tipped arrow.

Though they followed a procession, women had no part in the drama. Their chief role was to bring the men food and



drink in the *morada* while they prepared for the procession and after it ended.

In every procession, the *hermano mayor*, or chief brother, carried the crucifix. The *rezador*, or reader, chanted from a small hand-written book of ritual. The crossbearers wore black hoods over their heads as a form of self-effacement.

At the *Calvario*, the whippers in humility prostrated themselves before the cross, where they remained while other Penitentes read prayers and sung chants. The brothers sometimes administered an occasional encouraging lash to a faltering or weary member. Their *disciplinas*, or whips, were made of tough, sharp-edged yucca fibers. Every member vowed to accept self-flagellation at least once after initiation.

The ritual of crucifixion, though varying from year to year, climaxed all Penitente Lenten ceremonies.

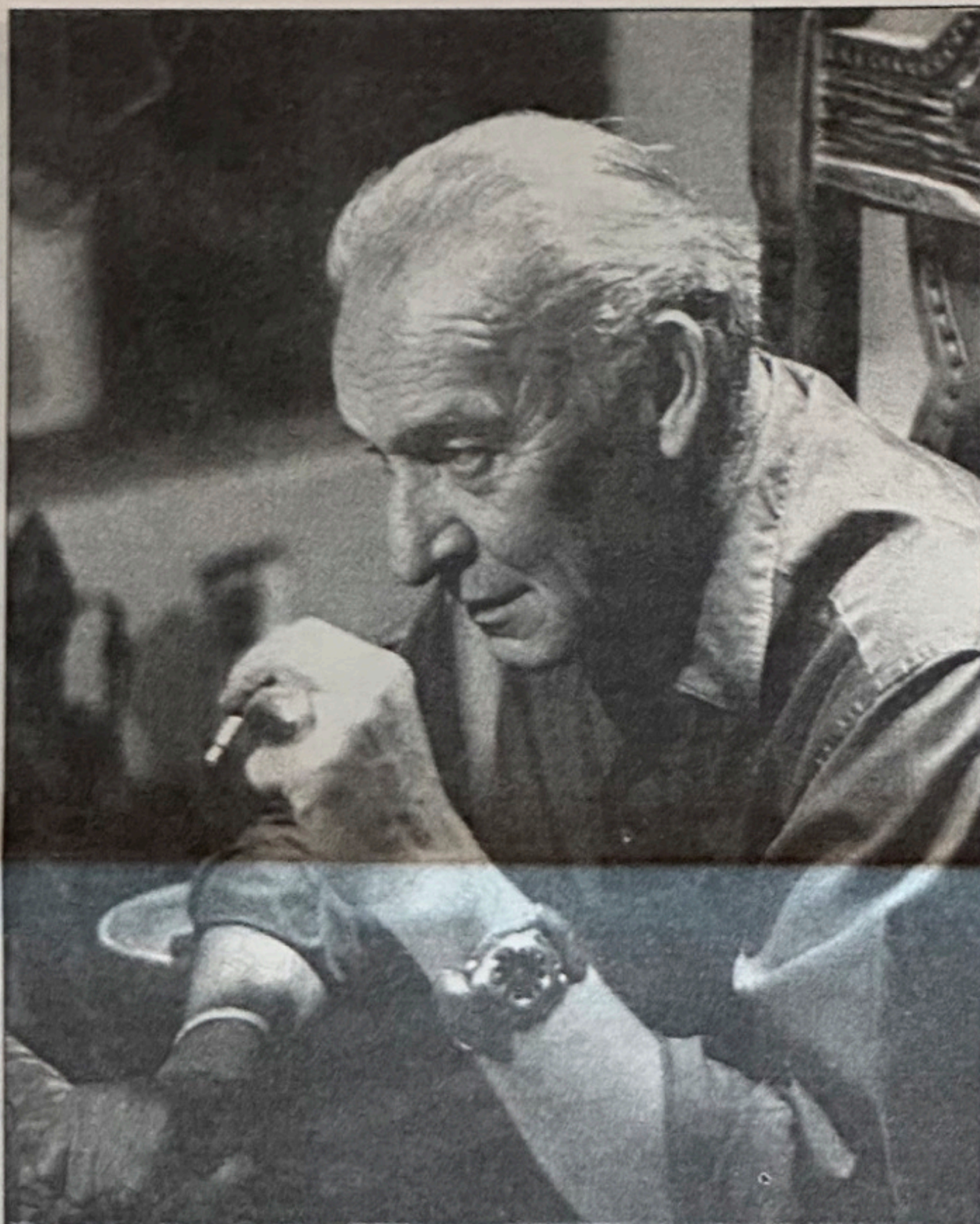
Often only one crucifixion was held for several participating communities or neighboring villages. The Penitentes bound the chosen subject to the cross while it lay upon the ground. Nailing rarely occurred: In Udell's *Penitente Crucifixion*, as seen on the cover of *Impact*, the subject is lashed to the cross. However, one story has it that Udell, after first arriving in Taos, treated Penitentes for nail wounds.

Those bound remained conscious for only a matter of minutes, since circulation was impaired. When the man on the cross lost consciousness, the cross was lowered and the procession returned to the *morada*.

On occasion, a brother died during a ceremony — from loss of blood or exposure. The announcement, as seen in Udell's *Death Came During Penance*, was made by leaving some article of the deceased's clothing, usually his shoes, on the doorstep of his home.

NO ONE MISTOOK Udell's creations for the works of Van Gogh or Gauguin. Udell's objective was, after all, to tell a story — the story of the Penitentes. Those people who did view his Penitente paintings were invariably impressed and often deeply moved. When the paintings were sent on their single tour, a catalog was printed to travel with them. In it, renowned artist Ben Shahn, who had come to know Udell while Shahn was teaching in Colorado, wrote this:

"These Penitente paintings of Udell's stand on their own feet as a great and moving epic. However weak they are technically — and they are that — I prefer them a thousandfold to the technically glib and humanly empty work which we see in such profusion today."



OF HIS PENITENTE works, Udell once said:

"No claim is made for the artistic accomplishment in the paintings. If they merit claim as an historical documentation of a phase of America, if they give pleasure and insight to the observer (without any sense of exploitation of things sacred), then a gift will have been returned to a land and people I cherish, and whose memory is a part of my daily life."

Isaac Udell was 80 when he died this past Feb. 20 in Phoenix, where he had retired in 1970. His ashes were spread over the Taos Valley and the sacred Taos Mountain, a land he loved and a land where the people he loved lived.

(See pages 8 and 9 for more of Udell's paintings.) ■

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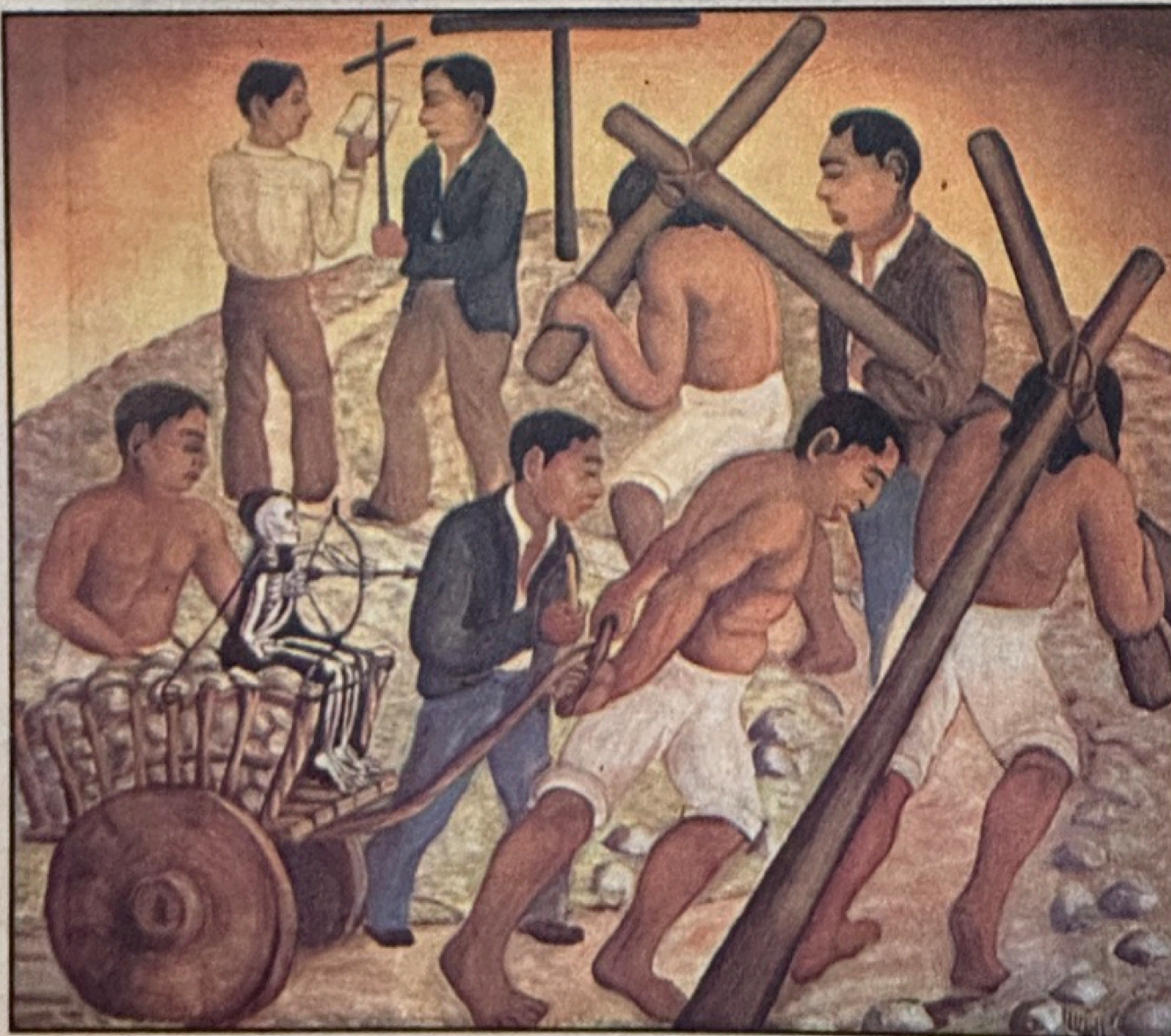
*Doc Udell: sympathy for a people whose faith he found deep and unquestioning.*



Raising the Cross shows a crucifixion to be a small intimate affair that used a smaller than usual cross.



In many processions the Carreta del Muerto, or death cart, was dragged by one of the brothers.







*While women and children played no official part in the ceremony, they often were included in The Gallery Procession.*



*Death Came During Penance portrays a tensely dramatic moment, that of announcing a brother's death.*