

# PENITENTE ART

## A GLIMPSE INTO A SECRET SOCIETY

by Tricia Hurst

Photography by Venus Masci

**F**or more than 45 years Isaac Udell, a big, white-haired, teddy bear of a man, practiced medicine in Taos. Patients paid him whatever they could (eggs, chickens, even a horse once) and whenever they could (sometimes never). Over the years he gained a reputation of archetypal proportion, serving the people of northern New Mexico and those who came from surrounding states, often staying in local motels to wait for him.

Few people knew of his avoca-

tion—the paintings of the stages of *Penitente* ritual, now in the custody of the Wurlitzer Foundation in Taos. A self-taught artist, Udell developed a primitive painting style and began painting the Pueblo people and Hispanics of the Taos area.

The *Penitentes*, a secretive religious group involved in Holy Week ceremonies that included self-flagellation and in earlier times even crucifixion, especially intrigued him. Udell befriended the *Penitentes* and treated them in his

office. In turn, they allowed him to witness their extremely private rituals in isolated villages.

During the 1930s, Udell completed 13 large paintings that captured the full range of the Brotherhood's Holy Week activities from beginning to end. To the best of anyone's knowledge, these works, depicting the Passion of Christ during the days of Lent, are the only documented accounts of the New Mexico *Penitentes* that have a history traceable to the late 1700s.



### THE LAST CROSS

*The last cross does not show any particular ceremony or ritual. It pictures a corner of an adobe-walled graveyard with a fresh grave where one of the Penitentes has been buried. The family has learned of the death and is at the grave as the procession of Brothers leaves the scene.*

*Need for this painting was felt as a writer feels the need for a concluding paragraph. It is one of the few instances in the series where the artist has taken the liberty of personal statement.*



### CALVARIO

*The Penitente procession having arrived at Calvario, the whippers in humility prostrated themselves before the cross, where they remained while prayers were read and chants were sung.*

*It should not be understood from the painting that the Penitentes lashed one another. Here a Brother is simply holding a disciplina, or whip, dropped by one of the flagellants. An occasional encouraging lash was sometimes administered to a faltering or weary member. Each Penitente measured his ordeal according to the dictates of his own conscience—atonement in proportion to his own interpretation of his wrongdoing.*



#### PROCESSION WITH CARRETA DEL MUERTO

In many processions the Carreta del Muerto, the death cart, is dragged by one of the Brothers. It was a wooden cart with solid hand-hewn wheels. More often than not it was loaded heavily with stones atop of which rode El Santo del Muerto, the Saint of Death, carved in the form of a skeleton, draped in black garments and carrying a bow with a red-tipped arrow.

Legend has it that once the arrow left the bow and penetrated the heart of an unbeliever who mocked. The arrow remains poised to speed on its just mission should the occasion arise again. The death cart might be dragged for miles, leaving a trail splashed with blood from the torn feet of the Brother dragging it. Its origin and use in Penitente processions is somewhat obscure. It does, however, add to the ordeal of penance.

Udell once wrote of the *Penitentes*, "I can ask only, at the expense of appearing sentimental, that the story of the 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."

"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."

In the late 1700s there was an insufficient number of clergy for Spanish settlers in the Southwest. 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.

With the exception of a few modifications and variations, Udell found nothing new in the practices of the Brothers. Self-flagellation had been used for centuries as atonement for sin. At one time in history, it 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 or 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: ranchers, shepherders, storekeepers, mechanics, clerks

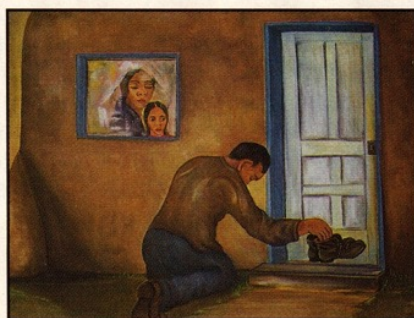
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#### TINIEBLAS

*Tinieblas service took place within the morada. The Brothers stationed themselves before an altar and about a lighted candelabrum. One by one the candles were snuffed out, and as the room became dark the Rezador (reader) and Pitero (flute player) pulled a blanket completely around them so that light from their lantern did not show into the darkened room. The lantern was necessary to read the ritual, which was too long to be memorized. When the room was totally dark, chains were rattled, shrieks pierced the quiet and general pandemonium broke loose. Such was the representation of the earthquake and storm after the crucifixion of Christ, when the graves yielded their dead and the wailings of souls in torment were heard.*

*Once the service began no one left. It might have lasted a little time or hours. The air was stifling from the close-packed, sweating bodies. The smell of blood was heavy and oppressive. The swish and thud of the whips punctuated moments of silence. Such was Tinieblas.*



#### DEATH CAME DURING PENANCE

*This painting portrays a tensely dramatic moment, that of announcing death during penance of a Brother. The announcement was made by leaving some article of the deceased's clothing, usually his shoes, upon the doorstep. This was the only notice of his death or admission of it. An occasional death occurred from loss of blood, exposure and pneumonia, especially in a season when there were raw, cold winds or late sleet and snow.*



**PENITENTE CRUCIFIXION**

Crucifixion of one of the members was a regular occurrence and maximized the activities of the order until another Lenten season. Often only one crucifixion was conducted for several participating communities of neighboring villages. Such a crucifixion was usually carried off with more solemnity and exactness, and with water drama. The chosen subject was bound, the cross was raised by lifting and pushing and with the aid of guy-ropes until it was "strung" into the hole dug for it. Men nailed to the cross in earlier times remained conscious for several hours; those bound remained conscious only a matter of minutes, since the circulation

was so greatly impaired. Injury often occurred to the heart. When the man on the cross lost consciousness the cross was lowered (often a lengthy process). The limp form was then unbound and carried to the morada.

In earlier times the man who was to represent Christ, (usually a teen-aged boy) was chosen a few years in advance and was to lead an exemplary life until the time of his supreme ordeal came. Eventually, with pressure from the church and state, and from education in schools few young men were found who would submit themselves to the exemplary life and to the crucifixion; the Cristo was then usually chosen by lottery.

and teachers. They lived 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 Roman Catholic Church frowned upon the *Penitentes*. Most priests, however, 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.

For many years, Udell's paintings remained at the Wurlitzer Foundation, some in storage and others remained on display. His works went on tour in this country and Europe and a catalog was printed to travel with them. In it, the renowned artist Ben Shahn, who had come to know Udell, wrote this:

"These *Penitente* paintings 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."

No one mistook Udell's creations for the works of Van Gogh or Gauguin. His objective was, after all, to tell a story. In 1985 he died at the age of 80. 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. ☸

**Tricia Hurst**, a Taos-based free-lance writer, has written for many publications, including the *Los Angeles Times*, *Interview*, *TV Guide* and the *Washington Post*.

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