be art of the tinsmith flourished in New Mexico from about 1840 to 1915. During this period Hispanic tinsmiths primarily made devotional objects that reflected the Roman Catholicism of the Spanish Southwest, but they also made a limited number of more secular objects. They used shapes derived from architecture as well as immensely fanciful designs of their own invention.

Tinwork developed in New Mexico as the materials—tin plate, glass, and printed religious images—became available to the craftsmen. Two events brought these materials to New Mexico. First, in the summer of

NEW MEXICAN TINWORK, 1840–1915
BY LANE COULTER

1846 the American Army of the West marched into Santa Fe and declared New Mexico a territory of the United States, and second, in 1851 the French-born prelate Jean Baptiste Lamy (1814–1888) was appointed head of the Catholic church in New Mexico by Pope Pius IX. The garrisoning of the American army in New Mexico increased trade along the Santa Fe Trail, bringing window glass, wallpaper, and five-gallon tin cans of lard and kerosene to the frontier. Bishop Lamy recruited young French priests to man the mostly vacant

PL. 1. Cross. Valencian Red and Green Tinwork, c. 1860. Tin with painted decoration, reverse-painted glass, and paper; height 17 1/2, width 14 1/2 inches. Except as noted, the objects illustrated are in the collection of Bob and Cindy Colleagues, and photographs are by Michel Monterraux.

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parishes, and encouraged the replacement of old devotional images in the churches with modern prints and plaster statues. The priests also supplied their parishioners with lithographs of the saints and small devotional cards printed with religious images.

The now-ubiquitous tin can was not commonly used for foodstuffs in the United States until after 1840 and not generally accepted by the public until its widespread use during the Civil War. The material used in tin cans—tin plate—is actually a thin sheet of iron (later steel) coated on both sides with molten tin. Tin plate was produced by monopoly in England throughout most of the nineteenth century, and it was exported to various can companies in the United States, usually in meat-packing regions of the country. Packed tins were shipped all over the country, traveling by ox-cart along the Santa Fe Trail to New Mexico until 1880, when railroad service was initiated. Cans bearing labels of packing companies in Maine, Baltimore, Chicago, Saint Louis and Kansas City, Missouri, and Denver were used by New Mexican tinsmiths. They generally bought the used cans for a few pennies from the army quartermaster or sutler and carefully flattened them for later use.

New Mexican craftsmen primarily used tin to devise elaborate frames for the religious prints promoted by Father Lamy and to create tin nichos—three-dimensional hanging niches—to hold the older hand-carved wooden holy figures, called bultos. The nichos were often basically a frame with a tin box three or four inches deep attached to the back. They generally had a hinged glass door across the front, so that the bultos could be changed or so that the interior space could be decorated with dried or paper flowers. Sometimes tinsmiths even made small crowns for the bultos (see Pl. XIV). Occasionally they soldered a small tin-framed print of a saint to the back wall of the nicho. Spanish tin craftsmen also produced crosses to hang on walls, the arms and upright often filled with panels of wallpaper or reverse-painted glass and the ends decorated with tin finials.

The most common secular objects made by Hispanic tinsmiths in New Mexico were sconces for candles and small coffered boxes, called baulitos, for storing jewelry, documents, or personal momentos. The tin sconces quickly replaced earlier wooden ones, which burned easily. They were made in a variety of shapes ranging from very simple to quite elaborate (see Pls. X, XI). Inexplicably, candelabras and candlesticks were not commonly part of the New Mexican tinsmiths' repertoire. A few chandeliers survive, which were made for churches or the houses of wealthy landowners. Baulitos were invariably made of glass panels backed with tin; between the layers was sand-
wiched a variety of printed materials. The basiliotis in Plates XVII and XVIII, for example, incorporate advertising cards from Syracuse, New York; an advertising card for Capitol Cylinder Oil; scenes from an illustrated World History Atlas; gummed floral stickers; a chromolithograph of monkeys riding on giant rats; and a variety of late nineteenth-century wallpaper fragments. Sometimes decorations were reverse painted on the glass panels of the basiliotis. Occasionally, tinsmiths made frames for secular images, including photographs (see Pl. XII). Trintypes, cabinet cards (mounted photographs), cyanotypes, and paper prints were all framed by tinsmiths, both singly and in groups.

The variety of religious prints found in New Mexican tin frames is intriguing. The earliest examples are small Mexican woodcuts or copperplate engravings shipped up the Chihuahua Trail in the early nineteenth century (see Pl. III). By far the most prevalent prints are hand-colored lithographs from France, Germany, and the eastern United States. The Parisian firm of Turgis is well represented by prints dating from the 1830s through the end of the century, and examples by LeMercier and Bousse Lebel are also known. German lithographs were shipped directly to German-born merchants in Las Vegas, Santa Fe, and Bernal, New Mexico, during the last third of the nineteenth century. The American printmaker Nathaniel Currier (1813–1888) produced a series of religious lithographs in 1848, and a few examples reached New Mexico. Far more common in New Mexican tin frames are prints from the religious series issued by Currier and Ives in the mid-1870s. Late in the nineteenth century, Kurz and Allison Art Studios of Chicago issued a group of religious lithographs that reached the southwestern market. By 1880 chromolithographs were commonly used in New Mexican tin frames, most of them produced by Benziger Brothers in Switzerland and distributed from their stores in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Saint Louis (see Pl. IX).

Recycling was an age-old custom in the chronically poor frontier Territory of New Mexico, where paper was very dear. Chromolithographs from store calendars and colorful pictures from seed catalogues were sometimes framed, as were illustrations cut from priests’ catalogues—never mind that the prices and sizes were included (see Pl. II). Newspapers from Denver,

Pl. III. Frame, Valencia Bird and Green Tinsmith, c. 1850. Tin with painted decoration, height 17”, width 11” inches. The frame contains an advertising chromolithograph.

Pl. VII. Frame, His/Her/Child Painted Workshop, c. 1890. Tin with painted decoration, reverse-painted glass, and paper; 21 inches square. The frame encloses a Mexican reverse painting on tin. Photograph by courtesy of the author.

Pl. VIII. Cross, Mexico Coulded Paint Tinsmith, c. 1890. Tin, reverse-painted glass, paper, and foil; height 17”, width 10” inches. The frame encloses a chromolithograph published by Benziger Brothers in Switzerland, c. 1890.
Saint Louis, and New York City were used to cushion the prints, and one early framed print was backed by a folded copy of the Congressional Record from 1866.

New Mexican tinsmiths adapted and altered old Spanish leather-working punches to decorate the surface of the tin, stamping it from the front or embossing it from the back. Some of the dies were sharpened and used to cut scalloped edges, and a dull knife-like tool was used to score straight lines on the tin. The most common design features of New Mexican tinwork are half-round lanterins at the top of frames and nichos, rosettes (both stamped and applied); birds, pediments; and various symmetrical appendages along the sides of frames or nichos, generally in the form of scrolls, leaves, or swags. The tin was often further enriched by painted decoration or inset with panels of wallpaper or pieces of reverse-painted glass.

Judging by comparisons of die-stamped elements, scoring details, painting, and overall design, the vast majority of surviving tinwork in New Mexico was produced by a dozen master...
given names that reflect their location and a major design feature of their work. For example, the Taos Serrate Tinsmith worked in Taos County and consistently used heavily serrated edges in his designs (see PL III). Also, typical of his work are the embossed rosettes and chevron patterns on the scrolled elements along the sides of the frame.

The octagonal frame in Plate IX is attributed to the Río Arriba Painted Workshop, the majority of whose work dates from 1870 to 1880. It is distinguished by its consistent use of reverse-painted glass, such as the octagonal piece of glass surrounding the chromolithograph of Christ in the sepulcher, and the eight glass panels joined by scored, stamped, and embossed triangular tin pieces. The color scheme of blue, red, yellow, and green is typical of the workshop, as is the combed, painted decoration. The nicho in Plate XIII is clearly by the same hand, with similar reverse-painted panels and stamped and embossed quarter-round tin corner pieces. The punch used to define the edges of the rosettes was a commercial saddler’s stamp. The Isleta Tinsmith also made regular use of reverse-painted glass panels, usually executed in red, green, and metallic-gold oil paints (see PL XIV). Like a number of frames attributable to him, this one contains a photograph of residents of the Isleta Pueblo Indian Reservation in Bernalillo County. The work of the Valencia Red and Green Tinsmith can be dated between about 1870 and 1900, based on the dates of the tin cans he used. It is recognizable by its combination of red and green paint, which has sometimes faded, oxidized, or flaked off, as is the case with the large frame in Plate VI. His work is also characterized by extensive use of single-dot punching and embossing, seen on the frame around the rectangular panel in the center and all over the sconce in Plate XI. The sconce in Plate X is also attributed to his shop.

Close examination has revealed that a group of objects clearly related to the work of the Valencia Red and Green Tinsmith is by another hand—the Valencia Red and Green II Workshop.

The differences between their work are exemplified by the frame in Plate III. It is more crudely constructed and haphazardly painted than the finely finished pieces by the Valencia Red and Green smith, and is of a rather eccentric shape. The frame in Plate IV is more carefully crafted but equally odd in shape and displays an idiosyncratic use of stylized leaves.

The only group of tinwork that seems to have originated in southern New Mexico is that attributed to the Mesilla Combed Paint Tinsmith. The greater over-all formality of his pieces is related to the formal abstraction of Mexican tinwork, possibly as a result of his proximity to Mexico. His pieces are easily recognized by the reverse-painted and finely-combed glass panels, usually executed with a dark brown or black oil-based paint backed with colored paper and metallic foil (see PL VIII). Typical of the nichos attributed to him, the one in Plate XVI is crowned by three scored and stamped tin lunettes, and has stylized swags along the sides and a trapezoidal compartment for the altarino.

The demand for tinwork declined in the early twentieth century, as frames for prints were
superseded by already-framed pictures shipped in by railroad. Electric lights or coal-oil lamps replaced candle sconces for lighting, and plaster statues supplanted the older retablos, eliminating the need for nichos. By 1915 virtually all the nineteenth-century tinsmiths had stopped working. Shortly thereafter, however, a new chentle for tinwork appeared in New Mexico—artists and tourists interested in the revival of Pueblo architecture. Their demand for light fixtures, wastepaper baskets, tissue holders, and other objects in keeping with the new styles brought about a revival of tinsmithing in New Mexico.

1 Initially, the can maker’s name was embossed into the surface of the can, while later labels were lithographed directly on the can. It is not unusual to find New Mexican tinwork with marks such as “A. Booth/Bentley,” “Baltimore” or “Philadelphia and Armour, Kansas City.”

2 These makers and the characteristics of their work are discussed in detail in Late Counter and Maurice Bloom, Jr., New Mexican Tinwork, 1840-1940 (Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1990), pp. 58-136.

PI. XVII. Bautista. New Mexico, c. 1890. Tin, glass, and paper; height 4.5, width 5.5, depth 1.5 inches. Similarity between the glass and tin are printed from an illustrated World History Atlas and some chrome/lithograph. Youth collection.

PI. XVIII. Bautista. New Mexico, c. 1880. Tin, glass, and paper; height 4.5, width 5.5, depth 1.5 inches. Similarity between the glass and tin in a variety of printed material.

PI. XIX. Frame. New Mexico, c. 1900. Tin, glass, and paper; height 4.5, width 4.5, depth 2.5 inches. The frame contains an American military insignia.