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Photo by Laura Gilpin

*Corn Dance, tempera, 1940, by Pablita Velarde, Santa Clara Pueblo.
From the collection of Mrs. Charles H. Dietrich*

PABLITA VELARDE: PAINTER OF PUEBLO LIFE

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L'AGE D'OR FLAMAND

PABLITA VELARDE: PAINTER OF PUEBLO LIFE

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PABLITA Velarde (Tsan) may well be considered the principal woman painter of Pueblo life since Indian Art's irreplaceable loss of Quah Ah in 1950. She is resourceful, industrious, a fine technician, and she has admirably retained much of the freshness and naïveté of expression that characterized her early paintings.

It has been just twenty years since Pablita began her painting career at the United States Indian School, Santa Fe, in September, 1932. She says that she had never done any painting before that time, and only such ordinary drawings as were required in connection with regular classroom studies. When she entered this school in the seventh grade, there were no classes in Indian painting.

Pablita had never gone to school in Santa Clara Pueblo where she had lived with her parents, Herman and Marianita (Chavarría) Velarde, from the date of her birth, September 19, 1918, until the age of six. Then, she and her sister Rosita had gone together to Santa Fe to attend St. Catherine's Indian School through the sixth grade. "I did not know a word of English until I went there," Pablita says.

However, she evidently acquired vivid impressions of her home pueblo along with the undisturbed learning of her native language during her early formative years; for, despite varied and acculturating experiences which have since greatly widened Pablita's social world, she still reveals in her frank, unaffected personality and her genuinely native art how well she knows and honors the best of Pueblo culture.

Pablita's first painting was of Santa Clara women molding coils of red-brown clay into large storage jars. After several weeks of

* Former art supervisor and instructor at the U. S. Indian School in Santa Fe, now residing in Las Cruces. This is second in a series of biographical sketches on her prominent Indian students and their respective art, the first being "Nehakije: Apache Artist," (Vol. 59, No. 3, pp. 71-6). An authority on Indian painting, she has contributed to *EL PALACIO* other articles in that field. She is a graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago and has done research in anthropology at various museums and universities in North America, recently having carried on research at the University of California in Berkeley this past summer.

experimental drawing in charcoal, and free brushwork in watercolor, she did the initial drawing for this painting in charcoal and colored it with chalk, changing it easily until it satisfied her. She made the final drawing in pencil on watercolor paper and laid in the opaque color flat, without modeling and largely without outlines. In this painting the composition was rather formally balanced and the color held fairly closely to the primary palette. It was a completely naïve painting, winsome in its unpretentious simplicity and its truth of content.

In later work, Pablita gradually abandoned the detailed preliminary study and either did a schematic pre-sketch or a careful drawing directly on the final paper. Through steady, serious application, her technique gained in facility of line and brushwork, and, by the end of her first year, her painting had lost much of its original unevenness.

In the first annual Indian painting exhibition at the Art Gallery of the Museum of New Mexico, 1933, Pablita and her sister Rosita showed a number of paintings which were thoroughly Pueblo and distinctly feminine. These somewhat representational works depicted such subjects as "Women Baking Bread," "Women Husking Corn," "Girl Winnowing Wheat," "Woman with Olla," "Women Putting on Moccasins," "Firing Pottery," and "Mother and Child."

Pablita did her first work in oil in the spring of 1933—a single figure of a Santa Clara girl painted on a long narrow panel for the Indian exhibition at Chicago's Century of Progress. This and a later earthcolor mural qualified her for participation in one of the Works Progress Administration's art projects in the autumn. In these large oil paintings of mural size, Pablita again did semi-naturalistic compositions of potters and corn harvesters in an authentic and capable manner similar to the style of her watercolors. The paintings were warm and meaningful with perhaps as much appeal to the ethnologist as to the artist.

Pablita, the student, had a merry disposition revealed through a provocative sense of humor. This, coupled with her bright, quick observation of everything around her, often made for clever, spontaneous comments on objects and occurrences which ordinarily would appear commonplace. With a word she could brighten a trying or even an exasperating situation. Yet, this trait never



Pablita Velarde

influenced her paintings; these were invariably serious. Along with her light-heartedness, Pablita possessed a maturity beyond her years. She was independent and not easily influenced—yet she was altogether reasonable. She could be depended upon to carry through to completion any undertaking she considered worthwhile. Obstacles in the routine operations of a big boarding school often stood in the way of her art, but she cheerfully worked at all odd hours to finish her paintings. She had a daring loyalty to the people and principles in which she believed.

When she arrived at her Junior year, Pablita felt the need of certain courses not offered at the Indian school, and yet she was reluctant to drop her painting classes. She decided to enroll at Española High School while living at home nearby. There she did outstanding work while continuing independently with her painting; but, when the special courses were finished, she returned to Santa Fe for the last semester of her senior year to complete her studio work and to rejoin her Indian class for graduation in the spring of 1936.

During the first two years after she finished school, Pablita worked as an assistant at the Santa Clara Pueblo Day School. She conducted painting classes for the children, and she also helped them with puppet plays and other creative projects. In addition, she built her own studio, from which she sold paintings and took others to the Pueblo markets sponsored by the New Mexico Association on Indian Affairs each Saturday in Santa Fe. At Fiestal time, she invariably won the Association's first prize in painting for her pueblo.

In October, 1938, Pablita had her first opportunity for travel. Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Thompson Seton invited her to accompany them on a four months' lecture tour through the Middle West to New York and back via the southern states.

Early in 1939, she coöperated with Olive Rush and a group of artists in painting casein tempera murals on the façade and in the entry of the newly completed Maisel Building in Albuquerque. The typical subject she chose for her contribution was "Santa Clara Women with Pottery." In this characteristic example of Pueblo life, the figures are organized in a massive, simple design which evokes the poise and gentle strength of Pueblo women.

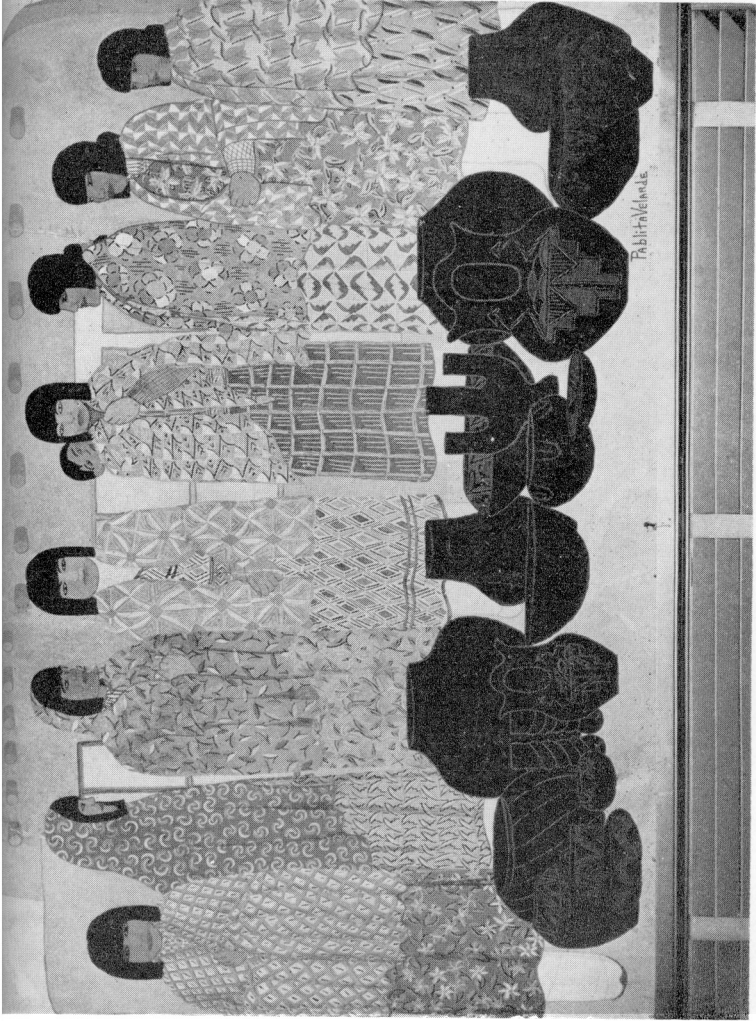


Photo by Caplin & Thompson
Mural in casein tempera, 1939. Painted by Pablita Velarde for Mr. Maurice Maisel

There is decoration, too, in the clothing and pottery, and in the faces, each a different design in itself. The calico dresses are minutely patterned with almost mechanical exactness, and the pottery forms are shaped firmly and painted precisely, as in life.

The following summer, the Federal Government began a large program of development at Bandelier National Monument, and Pablita was commissioned to do a series of paintings for the Ethnological Room. It was an ambitious project which required four large sets of paintings dealing with various areas of Pueblo culture. These demanded not only first hand knowledge but a great amount of research. Altogether, Pablita worked more than two years on this group and broadened her painting range to include ceremonials, hunts, animals, and many more aspects of Pueblo genre than she had heretofore explored. In the painting of all these subjects, an individual conservativeness and dignity prevailed.

In 1942, Pablita married Herbert Hardin, a graduate of the University of California, whom she had known for some time. When he entered the army, she returned to Santa Clara, where she devoted much of her time to painting. She exhibited again in Santa Fe and entered the National Exhibition of Indian Painting at the Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa. "I sold my first big picture there, and I felt I had really done something," she says in reference to this first time she had entered a national exhibition entirely on her own initiative. In subsequent Philbrook shows she won several Honorable Mentions, and, in 1949, the second Purchase Prize of one hundred dollars for her "Keres Corn Dance."

For the past few years, the Hardins—Pablita, Herbert, Helen Sharon, and Herbert II—have lived in a pleasant new home on the heights approaching the Sandía Mountains in Albuquerque, where both Pablita and the children paint. Two large, beautifully developed examples of her ceremonial paintings hang upon the living room walls for the enjoyment of her own family. Other works await future exhibitions, while one, showing successive stages of the Santa Clara potter's craft, still carries its blue ribbon award of the 1951 State Fair. "I think I'll keep this one; the children like it," Pablita says.

Paintings by Pablita Velarde are in the permanent collections

of the Philbrook Art Center and the Thomas Gilcrease Foundation, Tulsa. Others of her works are in the private collections of Mrs. Charles H. Dietrich, Mr. and Mrs. Charles de Young Elkus, Miss Annette Fassnacht, Mrs. Ronald Porter, Mrs. Hall Adams, Mr. Bruce Goff, and others. Her work has been exhibited widely in the United States.

The central theme in Pablita Velarde's career has been the quiet, steady pursuit of work of integrity. The same can be said of Quah Ah's art, which may have had some influence on Pablita's early painting concepts. Like the work of that late fine artist, Pablita's painting has never been brilliant, exotic, or startling; but, in its own way, it possesses the glowing color, the naturalness and poise, and the deep, rich symbolism of Pueblo life itself.

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MISS SIMS INSTALLS SHOW FOR BROOKLYN MUSEUM

Miss Agnes C. Sims, whose interesting local Plains Indian Exhibit with its featured Battle of the Little Bighorn was described last month, has recently returned from the East, where she supervised the installation of her exhibition, "American Indian Rock Drawings," for the Brooklyn Museum. A preview and reception of the show was held there on the opening night, October 8th. It will be on display till January, 1953.

Miss Sims installed a similar show for the Taylor Museum in Colorado Springs two years ago; and last year it was shown in the Hall of Ethnology, Museum of New Mexico. This material and show is currently on exhibit at The Museum, Texas Technological Institute at Lubbock, Texas.

While in the East, Miss Sims visited a number of museums and carried on research pertaining to her petrolyphic studies.

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DR. CHAPMAN RETURNS FROM MUSEUM TOUR

Dr. Kenneth M. Chapman, Head Associate (emeritus) of Indian Art at the Laboratory of Anthropology, arrived last month in Santa Fe from an extended trip to the East where he went to study museum collections related to his field of research. In the course of eight weeks, he visited a total of thirty-six museums in twenty-eight cities, going as far north as Toronto, Canada, and returning through New Orleans. In most of these museums he located and recorded much material, on exhibition or in storage, which will be helpful in his present and future work.