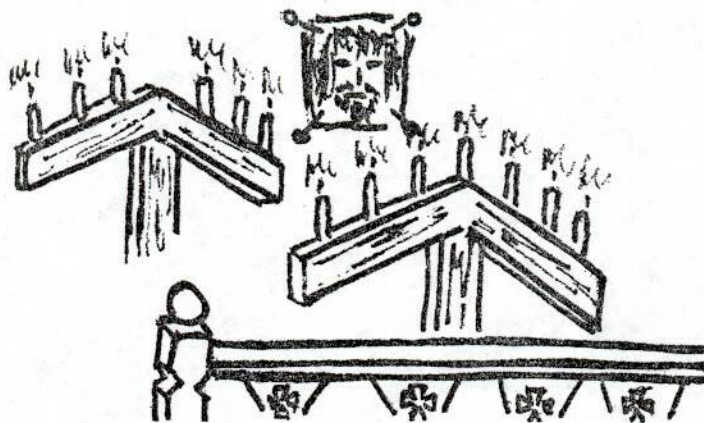




IX

THE RITUALS OF THE PENITENTES

Rouault could have come from Truchas. Although he was European, he best expressed the mood of Truchas and her Penitentes in his "Miserere", more than has any other artist.

To help better understand these fervently religious people one should be familiar with the works of Rouault, Nietzsche, Aeschylus, and Euripides, as well as Aristotle's Poetics, and Donaldson.

The tradition of identity by imitation, and the catharsis achieved in the Greek drama closely parallels the experience of participating in the Penitente rituals.

It is to have drunk the narcotic drought of the Orphic gods to the accompaniment of their night songs deep in the mountain forests; to have visited Dante's Purgatorio, and to have knelt at Fino-Slavic altars.

The blue and silver crescent of the Truchas Peaks, forming a natural amphitheatre at the foot of the Santa Cruz de Las Sierras,⁽²²⁾ is the perfect setting for the reenactment of Christ's Passion; the perfect mirror for mankind's greatest drama.

The Penitente is the archetype of suffering humanity, embodying man's deepest and most intense emotions, while at the same time ecstatically enraptured by his close proximity to the suffering Christ.

He has become His suffering and sympathetic companion, a dramatic protophenomena who is transformed before one's very eyes, a demigod who has taken possession of another body and another character, epidemically manifesting himself in grand metamorphosis.

The tragic chorus catalysis a narcosis on transformed beings while they whirl their matracas and blow their pipes down the winding road, etched in space, while marching on the precipice toward the towering indigo Truchas Peak against the raging winds in the cold moonlight, accompanied by the clanking of dragging chains, and swinging their torches and lanterns in accompaniment.

The whole drama bespeaks enchantment and becomes a work of art, indeed a strange and fearful drama.

THE LAST SUPPER

PART I

It was in the Morada shortly after midnight Holy Thursday morning. The Penitentes formed a semicircle around holding upright large crosses at least seven feet high. Their classic El Greco-like features were gently outlined in the soft vermillion glow of the candles they held in their hands.

The Penitentes had the sad and downcast look of men

were about to make the supreme sacrifice, as they sung the Alabados, Orphic hymns to the dying Christ.

The groaning table was heaped with plates of food;—fish, vegetables, and desserts. The cold and bitter wind was howling outside. A guard stood at the heavy timbered door of the Morada, occasionally opening it, probing the darkness with his powerful flashlight, as though expecting to find some unseen prowler or intruder.

Everybody ate with gusto in spite of the fact that the event was to celebrate one of history's saddest events, The Last Supper.⁽²³⁾ This was the first of many events that would culminate in the most terrifying moment of all, His crucifixion and death, and subsequent descent into Purgatorio.

The people of the village had been invited to the Morada to join together in remembrance of the sad occasion when the Lord last met with His apostles and foretold the foreboding sequence of events that were to culminate at Calvary.

The evening had begun with prayers and singing in the little chapel, in the nave of the Morada, not unlike the Lord that fatal night at Gethsemane.

ENCUENTRO

PART II

Good Friday morning we gathered in the patio of the old Truchas church. In the distance we could hear the mournful voices of the Carmelites as they slowly wended their sorrowful way through the narrow lanes between the houses, carrying with them the Mater Dolorosa (The Mother of Sorrows), the Mother of the soon to be crucified Christ.

Against the broad south wall of the church, as though it was the wailing wall of Jerusalem, the Carmelites sang of the

tragic loss of Her Son, pouring into their lament the great grief of all mothers in all times everywhere, whose sons had given their lives for aspirations, otherwise unattainable except by making the supreme sacrifice, even though perhaps beyond their own comprehension.

Down the main road came the Penitentes bearing on their shoulders a platform upon which stood, in abject humility the Cristo clothed in purple as described in Scripture. He was blindfolded with a black cloth, and a noose of frayed halyard was firmly secured around His neck, Ecce Homo, The Son, a condemned man about to die.

The Penitentes were sadly blowing their pipes in so solitary a fashion that each time they are heard, their mournful wails recall from the subconscious the nostalgia of an event so remote and unremembered, yet so provocative that one is almost overcome with grief, evoking a deep inner longing reaching far into one's historic subconscious.

The roaring matracas whirled ominously, foretelling impending doom, and the clackers ticked out the terminating heart beats of the condemned.

The Carmelites entered from the back of the church, and went into the patio. The Penitentes came through the front gate. For the first time since the beginning of His long ordeal, Mother and Son meet before the large Calvario. There was an interminable period of suspense, punctuated by the singing of the melancholy Alabados, that wafted on the crisp morning breeze. Without warning the Mother and Son fell into one another's arms at right angles to each other. Mother and Son, reliving a lifetime of dreams and memories, in one giant and grotesque embrace, forming a cross of black and purple.

There was a cry of awe and profound sorrow by the onlookers as the Mother and Son held their awkward position for what seemed an eternity. It was the Mother and Her

God-Son, a God-Man about to become a Man-God bidding farewell, an occasion for the greatest grief ever experienced by a mother for her son. The cool breeze fluttered their whispering gowns, echoed by the lamenting flutes, and the sobbing songs of the celebrants.

TINIEBLAS

PART III

Late that night the Penitentes marched into the old candlelit church, their matracas whirring, and pipes blowing shrilly. They marched straight up to the altar and stopped. The rezador⁽²⁵⁾ dropped out of the formation and walked onto the altar, and poured forth his grief and heart in song. The Penitente brothers gave their responses on bended knees antiphonically. Their eyes and faces were heavy and haggard with weariness from days and nights of processions and vigils. Now was the time for the Tinieblas.

Three of the brothers joined the rezador by singing together at the left of the altar. An elder brother took a seat on the altar to the right, and another took a place to the left as the Alabados were being sung. Each of the thirteen candles, seven on one side and six on the other side of the altar was extinguished as an Alabado was sung, until only one remained.

There was a rumble like heavy timber. Everyone licked his tongue and looked up in frightened suspense; then the last remaining candle was extinguished. All of His followers had defected. He had died alone. His rapid descent into the netherworld had begun. The pipes shrieked, echoing His agonies; chains rattled and pounded, and clanked, symbolizing the liberation of His soul. The

heavy thumping of boulders falling symbolised the earthquake,(26) and the opening of the graves of the saints. The pandemonium kept increasing like giant breakers in terrifying and deafening crescendo. There were loud cries of terror as the dead symbolically rose.

The hellish maddening roar increased in apocalyptic fury for about an hour, an hour that seemed an eternity, as the wild wind outside shrieked and tore at the shutters and the old tin roof as though they were echoing in violent fear and protest, cursing their inanimate state. Without portent, there was just as deafening a silence.

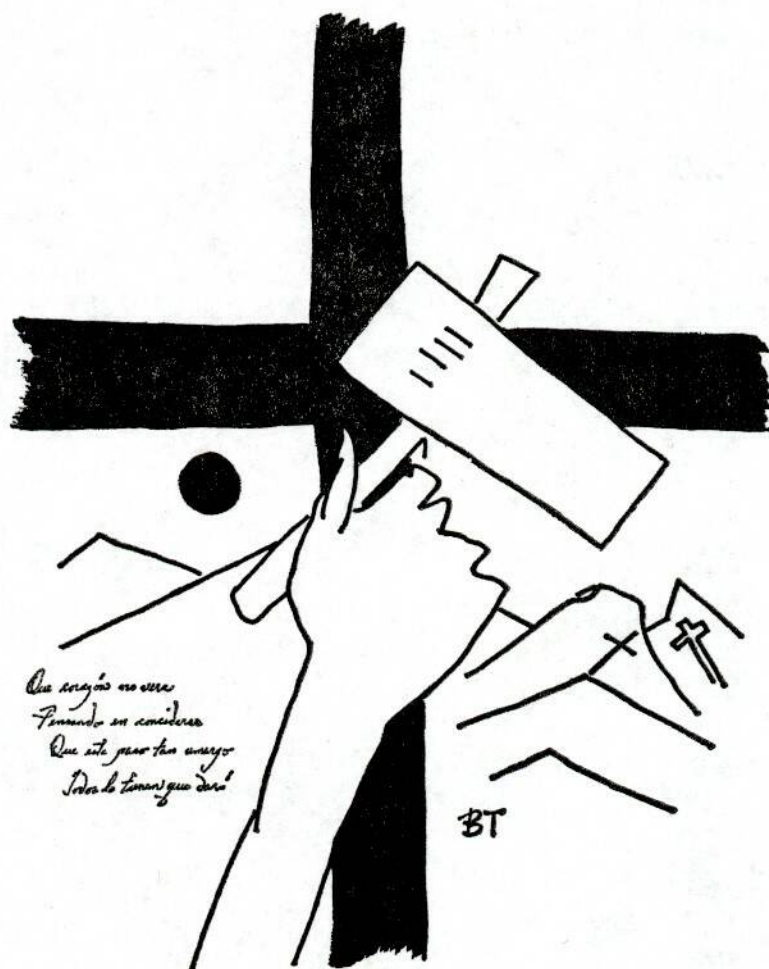
The Penitentes lit their lanterns as everyone sighed in grateful relief; looking around to see if they were still alive, and surprised that they were still whole after such a dreadful and frightening experience. The terrible moment had come and gone. The Penitentes broke the silence with song as they backed away from the altar, and disappeared out the door and into the darkness. Their lanterns swaying rhythmically reminded us that our Saviour was deep in His tomb, and that only the awful hush of a great loss and tragedy remained.

As we returned to our homes along the little road on the edge of the cliff the twinkling lights of the cities below and faraway glistened like myriads of stars in a sable sky, lent perspective to our experience. It was a journey through the ages, a moment in eternity.

The gleaming lights of Los Alamos, the Atom City on an invisible mesa in the darkness, on the mountains in the distance portended that this is today, but the swaying lanterns of the Penitentes, as they disappeared around the bend in the road ahead and their tragic chorus echoed by the lament of the wild winds said, "Yes, today, tomorrow, and all of the yesterdays are here today and forever."

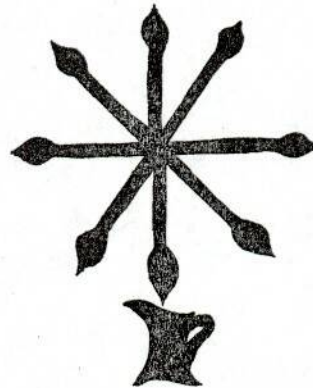
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→ Modernity staring into the tunnels
of the Middle Ages.



*Que seáis os vras
Fazendo as consideras
Que este peso tão amargo
Pode de tempos que dura!*

A DIOS! A DIOS! A DIOS!



FOOTNOTES

1. Penitente
Secret religious group in mountains of Northern New Mexico, and Southern Colorado.
2. Las Truchas, The Trouts
The fish is the symbol of Christian Missionaries.
Named in memory of the martyrs who first brought the Gospel to the Indians of Spanish America.
3. Sangre de Cristo, Blood of Christ
The Cross of the Penitentes.
4. To Worship in Secret, see Mathew Chap. 6.
5. Rosario, Rosary
The collection of Ave Marias and Padre Nuestros said at once, and counted by the beads of a rosary.
6. Alabados, Hymns
Sung in praise of the Sacrament.

7. Semana Santa, Holy Week
8. Morada, Abode of the Cristo. Meeting place of Penitentes. Contains a chapel complete with altar, and a secret inner chamber for the celebration of The Last Supper and secular meetings, etc.
9. Saints in the Valleys by Jose Espinosa. UNM Press.
10. See Franciscans and St. Francis Ency Brit.
11. See Donaldson's Theatre of the Greeks, Geo. Bell and Sons 1879, John William Donaldson D.D.
12. Spain, Spanish Literature, Ency Brit.
13. Theresa, St. Ency Brit.
14. Carmelites, Ency Brit.
15. John, St., of the Cross, Ency Brit.
16. Avila and Castile, Ency Brit.
17. Tertiaries, Ency Brit.
18. Santos, Mitchell Wilder and Edgar Breitenbach
The Taylor Museum, Colorado Springs Fine Art Center
19. USSR, Early Russian Icons, Victor Lasarell and Otto Demus New York Graphic Society.
20. Calvary, or Golgotha, the place of a skull.
Mark Chap. 15 Verse 22. A public cemetery on a mount or a hill. Where Jesus was crucified also the sepulchre of Joseph of Arimathea. His burial place.
21. Calvario, a large cross, designating Calvary. See 20.
22. The Crosses of the Mountains, huge glacial formed crosses on the sides of the Truchas Peaks, each about 2,000 ft. or more in length. It was after these the Sangre de Cristo Mountains were named by the early day explorers in the 16th Century.
23. The Holy Supper, Luke 22.
24. A wooden rattle consisting of a ratchet on a handle with two vibrating sticks in a wooden case, when spun makes a roar. Used by medieval churches during Lent or funerals in lieu of bells.
25. One who leads the prayers and singing.
26. The earthquake, Matthew Chap. 27.

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Bill Tate is an artist and writer who lives in Las Truchas, New Mexico, where he owns and operates the Tate Gallery. His paintings hang in private collections in almost every state, and many foreign countries.

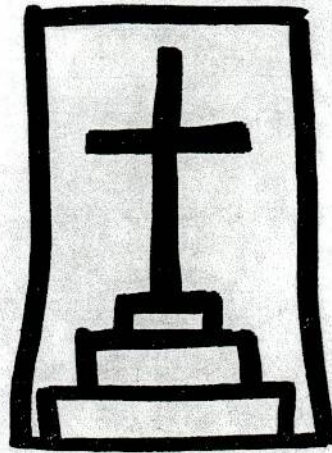
He is self educated, and is self taught as an artist. He served in the United States Navy where he was disabled, and subsequently was with the U.S. Engineers during World War II.

After the war he was a copy writer in California until stricken with a critical illness in 1952. After that he returned to New Mexico and devoted all his efforts to painting.

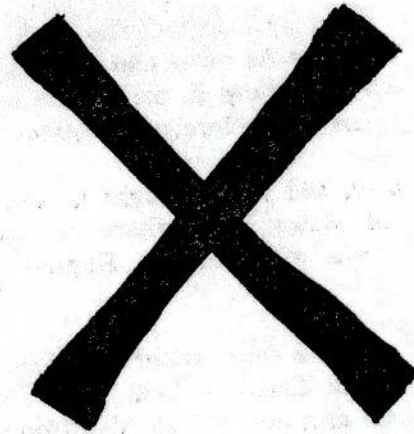
He is also a justice of the peace of Rio Arriba County, and is known as one of the southwest's best known primitive painters.

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THE MEANING OF SYMBOLS

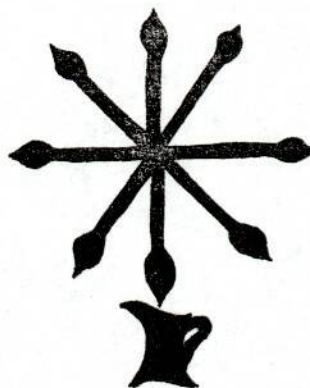


The Cross on a pediment of 3 steps. It is used to represent the Cross on Calvary. These are seen on Penitente altars in the Morada. Also the number thirteen in Chinese calligraphy.



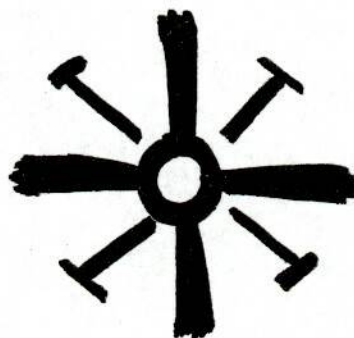
St. Andrew's Cross, upon which St. Andrew suffered a martyr's death, symbolizing that its bearers are prepared to make a like sacrifice.

The Tao



THE HOST AND CHALICE

Carved at the junction of a Penitente Calvario, located in Las Truchas. This is a very early Christian symbol. It is an "X" imposed on the Cross. The arrows since antiquity have represented the authority of God. The Cup is to catch and preserve Christ's blood. It represents the Penitentes as the conservators of the Faith.



The Cross and 4 nails. It was also used by the Copts.

