

Painstaking alchemy

Centuries-old tradition lives on through local artist

Story and photos by Ana June
The Free Press

From a distance, the wooden crosses and plaques on Della Vigil-Ulibarri's wall look inlaid with gold. Delicate flowers and birds juxtapose traditional textile patterns and *santuario* scenes, and even the finest detail stands out in brilliant contrast to the dark wood.

Upon closer inspection, however, the true source of the golden hue is not precious metal but simple straw.

Known as straw appliqué, the artform is similar to European marquetry, in which a material such as bone, ivory or metal is adhered in thin pieces to another surface. But in the small New Mexican villages where straw appliqué originated, traditional materials were limited or completely unavailable.

"They started this in the 1700s in the churches because they couldn't afford the gold crucifixes," Vigil-Ulibarri, 45, explained.

Over 200 years later, despite a period in the late 1800s in which the artform fell but died out, artists like Vigil-Ulibarri keep the tradition alive.

"I've visited Spanish Market many times and always loved the look," she said. Along with her parents and daughter, Felice, Vigil-Ulibarri learned the craft in about 4 hours from friend and artist Becky Gonzales.

"I started doing it as a hobby," she said. "Then I did a couple of craft fairs, local ones, and I did one in Chimayo where I know the priest."

That priest, the Reverend Julio Gonzalez, asked her to sell some of her appliquéd pieces in the Santuario de Chimayo gift shop.

Now, she is poised to have her first



An appliquéd plaque depicting the ceremonial procession of the penitentes during Holy Week.

booth in the 57-year-old Spanish Market.

"I applied last year but I didn't get in," she said.

When it came time to submit an application for the 2008 Spanish Market, she'd already rethought her approach.

"I submitted more contemporary pieces the first time but they like the more traditional, so this year I applied again and made the first round. Then I sent them three pieces and was called to participate."

Though this is her first Spanish Market, Vigil-Ulibarri is no stranger to the culture that inspires it. She can trace her family back at least 10 generations in northern New Mexico, and hints of her heritage are evident in her sunny Santa Fe home.

Among the treasures is a blanket woven more than 100 years ago by her great-grandmother, Martina Montoya,

from El Valle, N.M.

"She wove it for her daughter when she got married, who then passed it to her daughter when she got married. That was my dad's mom," Vigil-Ulibarri said.

Sadly, her dad's mom died shortly after delivering Vigil-Ulibarri's father, Leroy Vigil, and his twin — a baby girl who did not survive. The loss was unbearable for Vigil-Ulibarri's grandfather.

"He sort of went into a drunken stupor for awhile and he was going to sell [the blanket] at the bar so my godmother bought it from him."

Many years later, Vigil-Ulibarri's godmother gave it to her.

The infant Leroy was taken in and nursed by his own grandmother following his mother's death. Now 69, he is an accomplished woodworker. He recently moved from Truchas to Albuquerque, as the elevation was difficult for him since being diagnosed with chronic obstructive

pulmonary disease. But he continues his craft which includes making the crosses Vigil-Ulibarri appliqués.

"For awhile he couldn't make them because of his health and then my mother was in the hospital," said Vigil-Ulibarri.

Fortunately, he was eventually able to go back to it.

The crosses connect Vigil-Ulibarri back through her father to the original inspiration for the art — weaving the lustre of gold out of straw, a kind of alchemy that requires an exacting, steady hand.

Vigil-Ulibarri's daughter, Felice, 19, has found a connection to the tradition as well. A stunning cross Felice appliquéd with climbing roses hangs among her mother's work.

Vigil-Ulibarri smiled as she looked at her daughter's cross. Felice participated in the Spanish Market in 2002, where she won four awards in the youth division, including the Museum Purchase Award and the Bienvenidos Award for first-time participants.

Both mother and daughter have an affinity for the art that transcends selling it, however.

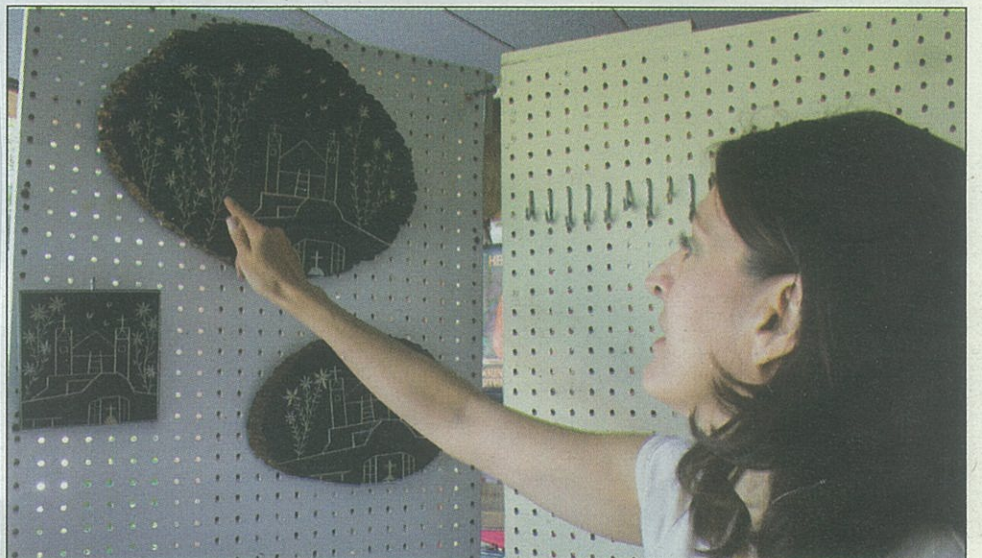
"Our neighbor asked Felice to make a big [cross] like this and when she did, she didn't want to sell it," she laughed.

And despite her delight over being juried into the Spanish Market this year, selling her work is something she clearly struggles with.

"How do you price your art?" she wondered. Considering the connection to a cherished tradition, and to family, it's not hard to understand her quandary.

"There's so much more that goes into these than just what you see," she said.

"I really have a passion for it; it gives me time to sit and meditate. And give thanks for my blessings."



Della Vigil-Ulibarri points out the delicate detail in foliage surrounding the famous image of the Santuario de Chimayo.