

From Taos, New Mexico to the Hopi mesas of Arizona, the oral traditions of story continue to shape the living culture of the Pueblo peoples. Historically, one central figure in these traditions has been the Corn Mother, the giver of life. This legendary entity is important to the Pueblo cultures, as she is synonymous with Mother Earth and represents growth, life, creativity, and the feminine aspects of the world.

Although her influence diminished with the coming of the Spanish conquest and the introduction of Christianity, Pueblo communities still preserve their knowledge of the Corn Mother. Some legends say that she will return one day to bring harmony and enlightenment.

This collection of portraits and stories is about today's Corn Mothers. They are women who live, study, and work in the Southwest: Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and northern Texas. Some are native, indigenous to this region. Others have journeyed here, as thousands have done for centuries, from other places. They all share an ability to pull from the past all that is sacred and holy, and to create a future that is filled with promise.

The show is based on the Pueblo myth of the Corn Mothers, said to have sung in the essence of creation, including the sacred Kachinas. The exhibition, a 2007 Rocky Mountain Women's Institute award winner, features multi-cultural and multi-generational women from Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas, who embody the spirit of the Southwest.

One of the most unique exhibitions to come out of Colorado, the show's focus is a photo exhibition of women who have earned accolades for community activism and creative endeavors. Each featured woman also recounts in story form her memories of the women who influenced her in her life journey. A documentary clip by C'Rodrigo gives a behind-the-scene account of this three-year project.

"This show is about women from 29 to 89 who tell stories that help shape and nurture our country. They represent the circle of life and the continuation of a never-ending story about love and perseverance," said curator Renee Fajardo-Anstine. Master storyteller Carl Ruby and editor Ed Winograd helped gather and prepare their stories for this exhibition. Arlette Lucero, Chicana muralist, rendered the original art.

Todd Pierson, master photographer, traveled the Southwest to capture these unique women in their home environment. They include world-renowned Isleta Pueblo potter Stella Teller; painter Evelyn Valdez-Martinez, who works with the Tarahumara Indians; Concha Allen, a

curandera (healer) from Mexico; Rita Wallace, a famed embroidery artist; and Ami Duncan, a third-generation midwife living in Arizona's remote Gila Mountains. Pierson's portraits capture the essence of these women, who are often overlooked by today's fast-paced world.

Fajardo added, "These women tell their stories and the stories of their own women, who may not be monetarily successful by modern standards, but who are a powerful force that permeates every part of our society on all levels. These are women whose voices we never hear because they speak a language we have forgotten. This is a tribute to those unsung, who have given so much and asked so little."

Wise Women of the Southwest: Return of the Corn Mothers

***What is A Corn Mother?** A woman who shares an ability to pull from the past all that is sacred and holy, and to create a future that is filled with promise.*

Colorado had experienced an extremely dry winter but on this day heavy rain was forecast - thunder, downpour, lightning and snow. So though the weather may have been ominous the gift of moisture was wonderful. It seemed appropriate that the Symposium: Wise Women of the Southwest: Return of the Corn Mothers should occur on the day moisture returned to Colorado, and we were blessed with three days of renewing soaking rain and snow.

We planned to attend the Corn Mothers Workshop on The Role of Traditional Arts in Healing. The blurb stated that, "Women have long used touch to treat illness, whether physical or emotional. Hear firsthand accounts of women who see, feel, and touch the human condition and who help us heal our personal and community wounds, using story, touch, song, music and ceremony."

How could anyone turn down an invitation like that and we weren't disappointed!

It had been a while since we visited the Metro Campus in downtown Denver, so navigating our way through the reconditioned downtown area, crisscrossing freeways, parkways, past amusement parks, entertainment centers and ballparks was a little hairy. Then negotiating parking lots for visitors, locating where the workshop was to be held was also a bit of a maze because no one, including the information center, knew where exactly where the room was.

So slightly frustrated we wandered outside to locate the church where the registration was taking place when suddenly walking towards us were a group of women dressed ceremonially from various cultures, Native American, Hispanic, Jewish etc. We just sensed these were the women we were looking for. We asked and they were! So in one moment we were part of their group and all swept inside, upstairs and right into the room that wasn't there before.

All journeys worthwhile are thwart with difficulty at the beginning as ours was but the effort to connect makes you somehow more a part of the experience. We entered the room where all the chairs had been set up like a lecture hall lined up like good troops facing the podium. The first thing that these beautiful women did was scatter the formation and form a circle and as more people kept arriving more chairs were needed eventually the circle ended up more egg shaped. Which was fine as it was representative of the womb, very female and welcoming.

The six corn mothers sharing their story and their stories were

Concha Garcia Allen (Uruapan, Michoacan Mexican)

Carrie Howell (Pawnee/Flandeau Santee Sioux)

Cherie Karo Schwartz (Jewish, of Polish, Russian, Hungarian, English, Spanish, Greek, Israeli background)

Sara Ransom (Welsh, Irish, English)

Rose Red Elk (Lakota, Chippewa, Seneca)

Christina M. Sigala – (Chicano)

All had stories which had been passed down through their culture and teachers. Compassion, Understanding, Feeling, Permission, Anger, Self-Healing were topics of each story. These women were generous with their spirits. There was modesty about their knowledge. Warmth, and genuine appreciation was felt for the people who had come to sit in circle with them. Their healings were personalized, individual but not separate. They imparted their wisdom with unique energy but all communicated from the same source – their centers. Cherie Karo Schwartz shared the oral tradition of the Jewish stories appealing to your intellect. She told stories that dealt with fear and compassion.

Rose Red Elk used music and storytelling to relay the teaching of the four directions representing the four nations red, yellow, black and white, reminding your heart and mind that all people have gifts and stories. Sara Ransom used puppets and marionettes representing European fairy tales that engaged your magical and imaginative side. Carrie Howell's gift was dance using the body's rhythm to connect to the earth. Relaying the wisdom behind the Hoop Dance of the Plains taught the strength of unity and the weakness of division. Christina M. Sigala demonstrated her enormous capacity for compassion and understanding especially about the passing over of loved ones. She used her arms to embrace and support your body and heart. Concha Garcia Allen with frank open honesty shared her journey of learning, healing and understanding from her nurturing center.

Embracing you with all your frailties and lessons, giving you hope for your journey. We talked, shared, listened and questioned trying to understand what we need to do right now, how to make the change less painful in this transitioning world. There are no quick answers. Each one of us must learn to walk in balance, share our gifts, and be open to change, speak from the heart, be proud but not arrogant and listen to the mother with respect. Have faith; this was the lesson of the Corn Mothers.

We left walking in the rain feeling blessed by both the earth and the sky. The stories we heard made us feel connected and nurtured.

Symposium: Wise Women of the Southwest: Return of the Corn Mothers at Metropolitan State College Denver Thursday April 16th. Thank you.

Wise Women of the Southwest: Return of the Corn Mothers

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