

Beauty & Function

By [Kate McGraw](#) / [For the Journal](#) Published: Friday, January 27th, 2012 at 12:02am Updated: Thursday, January 26th, 2012 at 9:26pm

.....
.....

SANTA FE, N.M. — Don't say "no" to Cleo Romero. Don't say, "You can't do that."

"It just poses a challenge to me," she said. "It just makes me more determined."

The master tinwork artist from Santa Fe's Spanish Market won the first prize in tinwork the first year she was accepted, 2006, with a scone she'd made through trial and error after a history museum volunteer condescendingly said it was too advanced for a beginner like her.

Now she's in a museum herself. Romero's work, and that of 19 other Spanish Market tinmeisters, is being spotlighted in an exhibition opening today at the Museum of Spanish Colonial Art on Camino Lejo.

"You should see the work; it's marvelous," Museum Director Donna Pedace said excitedly. "And we're painting the walls of the exhibit room a brilliant red. It's just going to pop against that red."

The tinwork will be displayed in the dedicated Spanish Market Gallery and will feature a variety of modern-day pieces by current Spanish Market artists, as well as a special section featuring old pieces for which the artists used original tin cans to create their art work. Many

of these pieces still show — and sometimes incorporate into the design — the commercial logos.

Tinwork for home décor and functional use evolved in Spanish Colonial times once tin cans came into the colony through trade. The exhibit pieces will include mirrors, sconces, nichos, frames and other decorative, as well as functional, art work. Several beautiful pieces in the older tinwork exhibit were done by long-ago tin masters. Pedace said they are a wonderful window on the creativity shown by those working with whatever materials could be obtained at the time.

Romero is showing a tin box with reverse glass painting and a tin rose inside. It was a first-place piece in the 2008 Spanish Market.

A lifelong resident of the Nambe Valley, the 58-year-old put in 30 years in banking in Santa Fe before deciding to concentrate on her burgeoning career as an artist in 2004. “It’s just an incredible experience to be able to create and to sell your work,” She said. “It’s a wonderful feeling.”

She worked for the First National Bank of Santa Fe, enduring four bank robberies, until a fall on the ice outside the bank sent her home on leave in 2003. Romero discovered she liked being home. “I always had a love for tinwork, but it was one of those things that I always felt that there was just no way that I could ever do that,” she said.

“ I took a class at (what was then) Northern New Mexico Community College, but I just piddled around and did little things till my father landed up having to have open heart surgery.” Reluctant to leave him and looking for a way to make some money, Romero started taking the tinwork more seriously. She began studying the traditional Spanish colonial art at museums and in books. She applied for Spanish Market

but wasn't chosen. One day in early 2006, she showed a picture of an antique sconce to a volunteer at the history museum, who told her the piece was in a private collection. "Besides, honey, that's a very aggressive piece for an advanced person, much less but a beginner," the volunteer said.

"That challenged me. I made it, was juried into market, and won first place in tinwork," said Romero. "That was In July. In September, I won best of show at the State Fair for a mirror. The following year, I won a third place award at market; the third year a first and second, and the museum purchased a piece. The fourth year, I won first place again."

Romero's mother died last year, but her dad, now pushing 92, is fine, thank you. The pair took a road trip in October and had a great time, she said. She acknowledged that her happy career in tinwork has kept her young — well, that and "staying out of banking."

Besides becoming an acknowledged master of the art, Pedace said, Romero has also become a wonderful teacher. "We use her in school visits and in our Arts Alive! summer program. She's a great teacher," the museum director said.

Current market artists featured in the exhibit include Javier Lorenzo Blea, Kevin Burgess de Chávez, Christine Montaña Carey, Carmelita Laura Valdes Damron, J. D. Damron y Valdes de Martinez, Martha Varoz Ewing, Cristina Hernández Feldewert, Richard Gabriel, Jr., Michael E. Griego, Eugenio Gurulé, Fred Ray López, Gregory D. Lucero, Verne L. Lucero, Nicolás Madrid, Juan D. Martínez, Jr., Rita V. Martínez, Justin Gallegos Mayrant, Cleo Romero and Jason Younis y Delgado. They range in Spanish Market experience from a decade or more to first-year market artists.

Javier Lorenzo Blea said he'd been doing tinwork for about seven years, but this past summer was his first as a juried Spanish Market artist.

"I've always been attracted to New Mexico's Spanish colonial arts like retablos and bultos," he said. He said he got into tinwork "kind of by accident." His trade was construction, doing sheet metal fabrication, but that industry is in a serious downward turn now.

"My mother always encouraged me to try tinwork," Blea, 36, said. "I've always been able to draw and paint. I decided to give it a try. I always had an artistic bent. I learned to love tinwork for the fact that it's time-consuming and requires lots of patience."

There's another quality about the tinwork medium that intrigued him, he said. "Once you make a stamp, you can't erase it. That appeals to my perfectionist side," Blea said.

"I always loved tin picture frames and light fixtures," he said. Born and raised in Santa Fe, he spent his childhood going to Spanish Market with his mother. "We went to Spanish Market together every year because she is a fan of art," he said. She's also a fan of his work. "She has to be my supporter; she received most of my earlier work," Blea said with a laugh. For the MOSCA show, he made a depiction of Our Lady of Guadalupe. "It's my version of a tin retablo," he said. "I love retablos, but I want to stay with my medium."

Cristina Hernandez Feldewert started making tinwork objects in 1994. Her father, Joe L. Hernandez, was an orthodontist in Santa Fe. "He was a filigree artist himself, but he liked to learn a lot of different things. He and I kind of learned it together. Whenever he'd run into trouble, he'd call other tinwork artists and get ideas," his daughter

remembered.

Dr. Hernandez made his own tools and repaired a few tin pieces and made a few pieces for his own home, but he faded out on tinwork. “About that time, he became more interested in filigree work and passed the tin working tools to me,” she said. “I just took the tools and ran with it.” She worked for a few years and took a few workshops from established masters like Ted Arellano, Richard Gabriel and Michael Griego.

“I kind of developed my own style and my own way of doing it,” Feldewert said. “I started really wanting to have my pieces have a contemporary feel, and I juried into the Contemporary Spanish Market. I was in Contemporary Market for about 10 years, and then I juried into the traditional market in 2004. I guess my style development followed an opposite arc from many people.”

Since 2004, Hernandez Feldewert has been incorporating reverse glass painting. “That one I self-taught with just a whole lot of experimentation,” she said. She studied museum pieces for inspiration. The artist uses both oil and acrylic, depending on the piece.

Hernandez Feldewert, 47, is married to Santa Fe lawyer Michael Feldewert. They have three children. Balancing her artwork with child raising was not a problem, she said: “I just brought the kids into the studio with me. From a very early age, they worked alongside me. All three kids have showed in youth market and won lots of awards in tinwork and retablo painting.”

For this show, Hernandez Feldewert entered a nicho she made. She has recently begun working in straw appliqué and was juried into market

in straw appliqué last year, as well as in tinwork. Her nicho incorporates symbols of the Trinity in the tinwork and a Holy Family done in straw appliqué.