

How a Banker Evolved into a Tin Wizard: the Story of Cleo Romero

By [John Knoll](#) • on July 22, 2010 • Santa Fe New Mexican



Cleo Romero's face in her make-up mirror



Romero's flower nicho



Romero and Rosina Lopez de Short's collaborative retablo

In February of 2004, Cleo Romero walked out a door of the Community Bank in Espanola, her feet slipped out from underneath her and she landed with a thud on the icy parking lot. The fall left her convalescing in and out of bed for several weeks. During her recuperation she painfully drove to physical therapy and acupuncture treatments into the summer. Although the injury was painful-it was a form of whiplash-she slowly recovered and got back on her feet.

Prior to the fall, she worked 30 years in the banking business, rising from teller with First National Bank of Santa Fe to assistant vice-president with First National Bank of Santa Fe in the Pojoaque branch. During her banking career, the banks where she was employed were robbed four times. The first two robberies were armed robberies that occurred at the First Nation Bank of Santa Fe in Pojoaque in 1977 and 1984, while the latter two were at the Community Bank in Espanola.

“The first two robberies were takeovers with guns,” Romero said. “In the 1984 robbery, the gunmen wore ski masks. One gunman jumped over the counter and put a gun to the back of my head. I felt my life flash before me.”

Although the two robberies at the Community Bank didn’t involve guns-they were note passers-Romero, recounting the four incidents with tears in her eyes, said “the robberies put the fear of God into me.” It was during her recuperation after her fall that she had the time to reassess her life.

“Lying in bed after the accident, I thought, I don’t want to do this anymore. I wanted another job, but I didn’t know what I wanted to do.”

When she was a young girl, her father, Arturo Romero, whose family first settled in Pojoaque Valley in 1717, taught her carpenter skills. She thought about doing woodwork, but her real passion was tin work. Romero said she started working with tin in 2000 after taking a class at Northern New Mexico Community College, but her bank job didn’t give her much time to devote to her craft. As she recuperated, she enjoyed staying at home more and more. Then her father had open heart surgery in the summer of 2004 and she was blessed with the opportunity to spend time with him and help in his recovery.

“I started doing more and more tin work, but I didn’t think of myself as an artist,” she said. “My family kept encouraging me to apply for the Spanish Market. But I didn’t think I was good enough.” Her family kept telling her she was good enough to be in Spanish Market. Finally, they convinced her and in 2005 she applied for market, but was rejected.

“The rejection posed a challenge,” she said. “I love challenges. I told myself I would continue my tin work and apply for Spanish Market again in 2006.” Her persistence paid off. Not only was she accepted in 2006, she also won a first-place ribbon in tin works for her delicately crafted 12- inch sconce.

When Spanish Market opens this weekend, it will be the fifth year she has been accepted into the market. And every year she has been awarded for her expertise.

In 2007, she won an honorable mention for an octagon mirror. In the 2008 market, she won first place for a tin box that when opened had a rose inside. “I like to surprise people when they open my boxes,” she said. The Museum of Spanish Colonial Art purchased her rose box.

She also won a second place award for a coffee table embellished with her tin work. This same piece placed third at the New Mexico State Fair.

In the 2009 Spanish Market, she won another first place for a document box.

Her honors have piled up, she also won first place at the New Mexico State Fair for a Mora octagon mirror, embellished with hand flowers, painted in oil, using a reverse painting technique.

One of the few New Mexico artists using the reverse painting technique, which involves painting everything backwards on the back of a clear glass pane, Romero has now evolved to the point where she is teaching her craft.

“I just taught a tin-work workshop at the Natural History Museum to teachers from all over the United States, she said. “Teaching really appeals to me. And people tell me I’m a good teacher. It’s fun.”

Using a limited number of tools, including tin snips, hammer, nails and a screwdriver, her repertoire of tin works continues to expand.

“I get ideas from my dreams,” she said. “Most of my pieces I see in my mind before I create them.”

In this year’s Spanish Market, she will submit three pieces for judging: a flower nicho, a dresser make-up mirror and a retablo collaborative piece she created with Rosina Lopez de Short, a former art teacher at Pojoaque Valley High School.

With her reputation as one of New Mexico’s finest tin-workers her pieces range from \$4 to \$2,500. She said she often sells her high end pieces soon as the market opens on Saturday morning. “The market is set up to attract wealthy collectors,” she said. “But I always have pieces that anyone can take home. I think that’s important.”

Despite her awards and an ability to craft a variety of intricate works that includes: crucifixes, mirrors, chandeliers, tables, sconces, picture frames, baskets and flowers, she said she still has a difficult time believing her good fortune.

“I still don’t believe it,” she said. “People call me an artist, but I don’t feel like they’re talking about me. It’s incredible. Without the accident, I’d probably still be in banking.”

Impassioned about her art, she said she often works late into the night; always with a sense of wonder. “My art allows me to feel a connection with my heart,” she said. “I’ve always had faith, but somehow my spirituality never touched my heart until I started working as an artist.”