

New Mexico Museum of Art



HISTORY OF THE NEW MEXICO MUSEUM OF ART BUILDING

Built between April 1916 and November 1917, the Museum of Art is considered an adaption of traditional Hispanic and Pueblo Indian Architecture. The museum design incorporates elements from many historic buildings, most predominantly, the oldest surviving Mission church built in 1629 (pictured above), which still stands at Acoma Pueblo.

As the nation's oldest capitol city founded in 1610, Santa Fe was already more than 300 years old when New Mexico became a state in 1912. By the early twentieth century, there was a growing concern about construction of new buildings with modern designs that did not fit in with Santa Fe's predominant Southwestern adobe buildings. In the fall of 1912, concerned citizens staged the New-Old Santa Fe exhibition at the Palace of the Governors featuring their vision of what Santa Fe architecture could be with images and models.

The design of the Museum of Art building can safely be called a group effort. The architect of record is Isaac Rapp and his firm. By all accounts, the architect showed a great deal of flexibility and accommodation of the concerns and ideas posited by the team assembled by Edgar Lee Hewett. Archaeologist, visionary, and cultural entrepreneur and eventually, the first director of the Museum of New Mexico - Edgar Lee Hewett assembled a team of protégés:

- Wealthy northern New Mexico attorney Frank Springer, who raised the \$30,000 matching grant to construct the museum;
- Sylvanus Griswold Morley, a Harvard man who spent half the year in Santa Fe promoting it, and the other half in Mexico as a preeminent archaeologist at Mayan Yucatan;
- Kenneth Chapman, a trained illustrator and emerging expert on Pueblo Art, and diligent administrator;
- Carlos Vierra, a colorful painter who came to Santa Fe to cure his lung ailments;
- Jesse Nusbaum, an archaeologist and photographer, whose contractor father owned a brickyard.

Sylvanus Griswold Morley is credited with spotting a photo of a Colorado mining camp with a warehouse façade based on the Acoma Mission and recommending it to the group as a possible design prototype. Morley contacted local architect Isaac Rapp and asked him to make a watercolor of the mining camp warehouse façade to use in a display.

At about that same time in 1915, Hewitt was invited to be director of exhibits at the Panama California Exhibition in San Diego. Hewitt, too, enlisted Rapp, and asked the architect to develop the Acoma-inspired warehouse to serve as the State of New Mexico's pavilion at the San Diego exhibition.

The pavilion design proved to be such a success in San Diego that it prompted the New Mexico State Legislature to approve the model for a new art museum. The construction budget was \$60,000. Half of the \$60,000 came from the legislature and half from private sources. Frank Springer went to work raising funds. Jesse Nussbaum was appointed superintendent of construction with outlines that Rapp provided.

Adobe construction is defined the shaping of mud into sundried bricks, then plastered over the bricks with mud was first introduced by the Spaniards. While Missions were built with adobe brick, the museum was not, although the process was similar. The museum's bricks were kiln-fired, made by inmates in the state penitentiary.

Archival records indicate the penitentiary supplied 750-thousand bricks. The prisoner-made construction materials were supplanted by 48-thousand-pound steel girders from Chicago, and 2800 barrels of cement from the Ideal Cement Company in Colorado.

Use of the cement was two-fold: first, it was used to create structural elements; it was also diluted, mixed with sand and plaster to apply to the bricks to resemble adobe. All sculptural contours in the building today are the original plasterwork, the stucco coating has been redone three times since 1917. Deeply ingrained cultural construction traditions were employed and are still apparent in the ceilings and the hand-fashioned wood work.