

Project leader hopes
 'Trail of Painted Ponies' leads
 to more tourism, funds for charities



MAQUETTES:
 Two maquettes, or models, of
 painted horses were done by John
 Nieto, whose "Fire Pony" is on the left, and LD Burke,
 who did the "Navahorse" on the right.

Roping some horsepower

Story by ANTHONY DELLAFLORA

Photographs by MARK HOLM
 Of the Journal

If the public art scene in the United States is beginning to resemble Old McDonald's farm, there's a good reason.

Cows, pigs, buffalo, moose and now horses are just some of the animals that are being made into art objects in cities around the country.

Not the real animals, of course, but fiberglass models that are painted by artists and displayed in public places.

The craze took hold in Chicago last year with its "Cows on Parade" project, based on a similar project in Zurich, Switzerland.

More than 300 cows grazed silently throughout Chicago for several months, boosting tourism, and turning a nifty \$3.4 million profit for charities when about half were finally auctioned off.

Santa Fean Rod Barker hopes to achieve the same success with "The Trail of Painted Ponies," a project he hopes will leave its economic and artistic hoofprints throughout New Mexico.

Barker formed a for-profit company to promote the project, and hopes to get sponsors for 100 to 200 painted ponies that will be displayed in Santa Fe, Albuquerque and Taos starting next May.

Barker, an author, was researching a book in Chicago last year when he got wind of the cows.

"The dots that connected for me were that New Mexico's economy really thrives on outside visitors and tourism and this was a project that claimed to have brought 1 to 2 million new visitors to Chicago," Barker said.

It also struck Barker that New Mexico ski resorts had just suffered through their second snowless winter.

"It made me realize how vulnerable our economy is to weather and that this is a project that was not weather-dependent, that appealed to tourism, that worked for businesses, that spotlighted the artistic community — and we've got a big one in New Mexico — and it raised money for nonprofits and we have a lot of needy nonprofits, so I saw it as a win-win down the line."

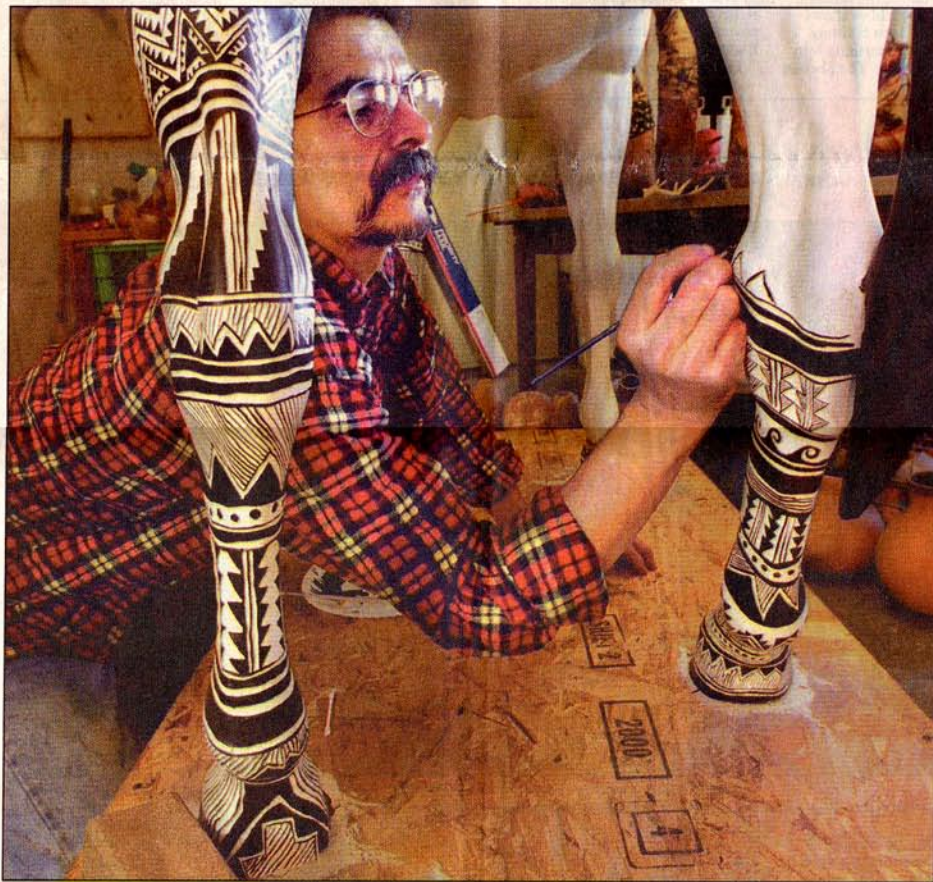
Barker said the horse was a natural for New Mexico.

"This is the animal that was introduced to North America by the Spanish four or five centuries ago, through New Mexico. The horse means different things to the different cultures in our state — Native American, Hispanic and Anglo. We have a big horse community in the state.

"That seemed to make it more appropriate. I felt that the horse as a canvas made a more interesting and attractive one than a cow."

Barker said he's already rounded up about 25 sponsors at \$5,000 a horse, mostly in Santa Fe.

Of that amount, artists are paid \$1,200, the horse costs \$1,400 and the rest goes to Barker's company to pay for



"ANASAZI ZEBRA": Artist Robert Rivera adds detail to his "Anasazi Zebra" painted horse in his Placitas studio. His is one of 100 to 200 horses to be painted by New Mexico artists for "The Trail of Painted Ponies."



LIFE-SIZED PALETTE:
 Yellow Man looks over a life-sized fiberglass horse he will paint for "The Trail of Painted Ponies" project.

Organizer hopes tourism follows ponies' lead

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administration and publicity for the event.

Barker said he will try to place horses where the sponsors want, but also will try to get them in herds, since that seemed to attract more attention in other cities.

He plans to place ponies in Old Town, Downtown, Nob Hill and the Support for starters.

The horses will be a business deduction and a charitable deduction both, not to mention great advertising, Barker said.

"We are setting up a creative way for businesses to market themselves, to participate in a project that's going to get a lot of visibility and attention," Barker noted.

He said each sponsor's name will be on a plaque with his horse and the sponsor will get to choose the artist.

Barker said he wanted to spread the ponies throughout New Mexico to bolster tourism.

"Call it a 'Trail of Painted Ponies' and this way encourage people who come to New Mexico to basically take a trail drive and spend more time in our state and visit more of our communities," Barker said.

In addition to Santa Fe, Albuquerque and Taos, Barker said there is interest in Clovis, Carlsbad, Silver City and Las Cruces.

The economic impact is potentially tremendous. Chicago officials estimated that the exhibit brought in revenues for local businesses of \$100 million to \$200 million in just over four months.

In Cincinnati last year, the "Big Pig Gig" brought in an estimated \$170 million to the city's economy.

Nathan Mason, curator of special projects for the Chicago Public Art Program, said he's not sure how the city arrived at the economic impact numbers, but doesn't doubt them.

"We had anecdotal reports when the cows weren't even on the street for a month about how stores had sold an additional \$40,000 over their projected usual percentages," he said.

"I don't think they're over-estimated because if you had been in downtown Chicago, it's amazing what you could see with your eyes and know that there were more people coming," Mason said.

Mason's been contacted by more than 100 people around the world interested in pulling off similar events.

"I'm talking to someone in Guam right now," Mason said. "There are at least three other projects in Australia that are occurring."



MARK HOLM/JOURNAL

PAINTING HIS PONY: Placitas artist Robert Rivera works on his "Anasazi Zebra."

After Chicago set the example, it didn't take long for civic pride to kick in around the United States.

New York City hosted a cow parade this summer, while New Orleans opted for fish with its "Festival of Fins."

Toronto was home for "Moose in the City" this fall, while Rhode Islanders paid tribute to Mr. Potato Head.

St. Paul recently honored Charles Schulz with more than 100 giant Snoopies, while Norfolk, Va., exhibited mermaids.

Chicago is trying to stay one step ahead, though. The next project is to exhibit fiberglass living room suites around the city.

"We want to take it up an artistic notch," Mason said.

Barker wants serious artists to be part of the New Mexico project. He also hopes architects, graphic designers and photographers will participate.

About 70 artists have expressed interest. To get a prospectus, artists can call Barker at (505) 955-9595 or e-mail him at horsepower@cybermesa.com. He hopes to create a pool of artists for sponsors to choose from.

He said he's particularly interested in concepts having to do with Route 66 and the state's Spanish connection.

Barker said he's sure Albuquerque in particular is tired of being considered the gateway to Taos and Santa Fe.

"It's a way of... showing their arts community that really has not had that opportunity to establish its identity."

When the exhibit ends next October, the horses will be auctioned off live and via the Internet.

Auction proceeds, minus auction costs, will go to charity.

"We are allowing the individual sponsors to select the approved nonprofit. It has to be in New Mexico and we want it to be either youth or education or cultural or arts-oriented," Barker said.

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