

Charlene Cerny Executive Director, Santa Fe International Folk Art Festival

As director of Santa Fe's Museum of International Folk Art between 1984 and 1999, Charlene Cerny oversaw a 135,000-object collection that ranged from Spanish colonial silver to contemporary African textiles. In 2004 she helped launch the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market, which seeks to preserve world craft traditions, one artist at a time. Recognized by UNESCO and the Clinton Global Initiative, the Market returns to Santa Fe July 13 to 15.



You have worked with historic and contemporary art. Which do you prefer? I appreciate the continuum of tradition. One of the greatest pleasures for me now is meeting our Market artists, 180 in all from 56 countries. You become acutely aware that you are transforming a life when you make a purchase. In a place like Niger, the per capita income is less than a dollar a day, so the Market feeds a lot of people.

Between 1979 and 1982 you collaborated with the twentieth-century designer and folk art collector Alexander Girard on the permanent installation of his collection in the Museum of International

Folk Art's Girard Wing. What did you learn? Sandro didn't care about age or value or provenance. He cared only about the power of the object in front of him. When it came to installing his collection, he wanted no labels—a very modernist point of view. He installed the collection in an organic way. In a sense, he was telling a story. A clay baptism scene from Oaxaca, Mexico, lit by a single tiny bulb, for example, expresses the common humanity of family and how ritual can enrich our lives no matter what our circumstances.

You also oversaw the acquisition of the Neutrogena collection and the construction of a new wing to house it. What was it like working with the collector Lloyd Cotsen? Lloyd developed an amazing collection that is documented in the book *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary*. The strength of the assemblage is really textiles. He worked closely with the late dealer Mary Hunt Kahlenberg. Like Sandro, Lloyd cared less about interpretation than the inherent beauty of the work.

Santa Fe has been called a city of markets. Why? We are famous for our nonprofit cultural markets, including Indian Market and Spanish Market. In our case, we achieve our mission, part of which is to foster economic and cultural sustainability for folk artists and folk art worldwide, through commerce.

Do you consider yourself a preservationist? I absolutely do. Traditional visual culture is highly threatened. For instance, India is one of the most folk art intensive places in the world yet even there handicrafts are considered a "sunset" industry. That is one reason why so many people have embraced the Market. They are inspired to join us in helping to save irreplaceable traditions.

Where are some of the more unusual places your work has taken you? A few years ago I found myself, jetlagged and having just arrived in Delhi, visiting with Sonia Gandhi in her office. I really loved Cuba. One of the most amazing places I've visited is Oman. Everyone should see it while it is still off-the-beaten track.

Charlene Cerny.
Photograph by C. Judith
Cooper Haden.

Untitled by Cuban painter
Carlos Alberto Cáceres
Valladares, who will be
a first-time exhibitor at
the Santa Fe
International Folk Art
Market in July.

Santa Fe International
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