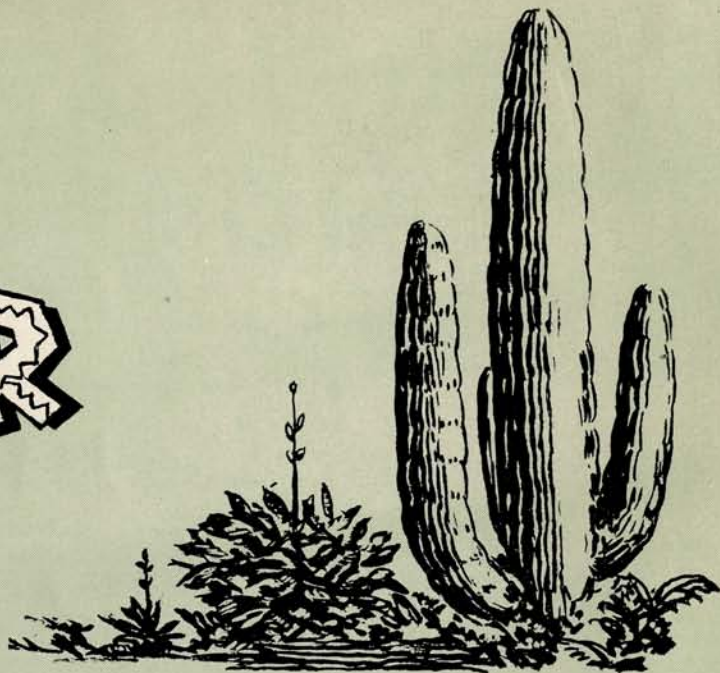


COLOR

in New Mexico

Ina Sizer Cassidy



Here in New Mexico we have our prehistoric cliff dwellings, our ruined Franciscan missions antedating (though known to few) the missions of California by a century, our Indian Pueblos with the same dance dramas danced before the coming of the Conquistadores, and our old villages hidden in the mountain valley where the natives speak the Spanish of Queen Elizabeth's day. But outstanding in this land of enchantment is its color—inside and outside our homes, in our clothing, everywhere—bold, exhilarating. Why? How is it that the Southwest is so (literally) colorful?

The love of color is something to feel, to absorb, to enjoy. Not to analyze. Color is a sensation, like smell, pleasant or unpleasant; like taste, sweet, sour, or bitter; like feel, smooth, soft, or rough. Color is associated with a definite stimulus of the optic nerve, certain colors, red, for instance, being more stimulating than others. Psychiatrists tell us that color is one of the three controlling natural instincts or sensations of man, but it is about the only instinct that has been almost completely submerged by civilization. So in many cases, color is prescribed in cures of certain kinds of mental illnesses.

Color is thought to stimulate spiritual vibrations which uplift the soul. A certain religious cult flourishing on the west coast has recognized this and has decreed that its followers shall use only certain colors in their dress and home furnishing in order to live a more saintly life on earth.

However this may be, there is no question but that color is demanded in this land of brilliant sunshine, of crystal air. The atmosphere itself has a gleam of golden warmth. It is not the cold silver glitter of Tunisia. Everywhere one looks is color—on land, in sky, in tree and shrub. Tawny plain, red gold hills, orange gashes where the highway, a black ribbon, cuts through huge hillsides of yellow ochre. Field carpets of lavender verbena, yellow rosin weed, blue columbine, purple wild pea, and aster. Black boulders strewn, spewed from long-extinct volcanos, to lend contrast.

This, the earth. Now the sky. Sunset and sunrise in our land rival those of the brilliant skies of Venice we hear

so much about. And the Cote d'Azur can show none more beautiful. In winter here the setting sun drapes a shimmering rose madder veil across snow-clad mountains cut against the turquoise sky, transforming the whole landscape into a glorious vision, giving the mountains their age-old name, Sangre de Cristo, Blood of Christ.

Perhaps it may be the primitive element of the land and its early inhabitants that explains New Mexico's use of color. All primitive people love color, and New Mexico is still primitive. In more than 400 years man has made little basic impression upon the land. It is much today as it was when the first Conquistador came. Man has not conquered the land here as he has in most other parts of the United States. Here the land has come nearer conquering man.

Space, too, has its share. Great open space has its effect upon us. It releases the spirits of its dwellers and visitors from more settled localities and frees inhibitions engendered there. Long-dormant instincts are unchained. Too often the newcomer reverts to his forgotten primitive nature, hitherto smothered or held in check by conventions.

With our houses built of the tawny earth itself, in time melting back into earth again, the eternal Mother, color must come to our aid, become a part of our life, as the struggling plants battling the elements of cold, heat, and drought must bloom, triumphantly declaring their success in fulfilling their destiny.

Color in New Mexico is a recognized necessity. And we have the courage to gratify this need, for here there is no Mrs. Grundy to demand suppression of it. Some persons seeking a cause, a reason for this departure from the conventional in the indulgence of color (also, sometime deportment), place the blame upon the altitude, for New Mexico is almost astride the Continental Divide, the great backbone of the continent, and altitude does affect people in various ways; but Alice Corbin, the poet, insists it is the latitude which affects them. I am inclined to agree with her. The love of color is inherent in all of us. In New Mexico we merely release it and "the sky determines."