Art has always played a profound role in Santa Fe’s cultural character. From the city’s founding in 1609 to the present, art has sustained and been integrally entwined with “The City Different” throughout its storied history.

The current impact of art on the local economy cannot be overestimated. The revenue that the local art market generates is a major engine in Santa Fe’s contemporary economy. Indeed, the two major factors that make Santa Fe a major tourist destination for over one million visitors a year are the cultural heritage and history of the city and the art that reflects this legacy.

According to a report presented by the University of New Mexico’s Bureau for Business and Economic Research in 2004, art and culture industries in Santa Fe account for over 12,000 jobs and employ one out of every six workers in the city. The arts in Santa Fe have an economic impact that is six times greater than the national average, making the city one of the largest art markets in the U.S. It is estimated that art related business in the city generates over 200 million dollars per year.

Indian Market alone which is held annually in August, brings more than 100,000 visitors to Santa Fe for the weekend event, more than doubling the city’s population. The popularity of Spanish Market also brings the city far-reaching distinction. The galleries and shops that line Canyon Road and the Plaza are a virtual wonderland of art and creative expression.

Music literally fills the air, ranging from the renowned Santa Fe Opera, the Lensic Performing Arts Center, the Santa Fe Bandstand’s 89 free performances in 2009 on the Santa Fe Plaza, to the seemingly limitless number of street musicians that play on street corners downtown.

Art museums, art educational institutions such as the Institute for American Indian Arts, College of Santa Fe and the Santa Fe Art Institute, book readings, live theater, clubs and concerts, film festivals, and the abundant weekly art happenings in Santa Fe make the city a true cultural Mecca.

Santa Fe’s history attests to the fact that art has always been central to the culture and identity of its people. This symbiotic relationship can be traced throughout the centuries.

The earliest Santa Feans occupied an area around the Santa Fe River sometime about 1050 A.D. These ancestors of the Pueblo people wove blankets, baskets and sandals using yucca and other fibers. They utilized pottery, basketry and textile weaving as part of their everyday living and incorporated distinct artistic application into these items. Contact with the Spanish led Pueblo artists in new directions. They combined the turquoise they considered sacred with silver to create their unique jewelry after the Spanish introduced silver mining to the Southwest.

When the railroad arrived in Santa Fe in the 1880s, Pueblo artists responded to the new demand for their art by creating items intended for the tourist market. Throughout the twentieth century, interest and demand continued to grow in the U.S. and internationally for Pueblo art. Well known Pueblo Artists include Helen Cordero of Cochiti Pueblo who produced the popular Storyteller clay figures and Maria Martinez, the San Ildefonso potter who created the now famous black-on-black pottery in the
early 1920s.

The first Spanish colonists who accompanied Juan de Oñate to Northern New Mexico in 1598 encountered difficult living conditions. Few of the amenities that they were accustomed to having in Mexico and/or Spain were available. Their lot did not improve during much of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. The isolation of the Spanish colonists led to the development of a unique folk culture in Santa Fe and Northern New Mexico. The art work produced in this environment has been called, “the most important manifestation of folk art in this country, and is in fact the only non-Indian religious art native to it” (Shalkop, 1987).

Spanish colonial art was primarily religious in content. The art reflected the importance of the Catholic faith in the identity of the culture. These works of art were more than just pleasant luxuries for the Spanish colonists. These objects were “cultural necessities” which carried great symbolic weight. Spanish colonial art maintained the colonists’ connection with their roots, their community of origin. The importance of these works of art was magnified, given the remoteness of their environment and the need for the colonists to maintain a link to their faith and to their cultural identity.

The nature of the art scene in Santa Fe was dramatically influenced by new immigrants. These were the Anglo artists from primarily the eastern United States. They were among the first Anglo-Americans to settle in the Santa Fe and Taos areas. By the early 1900s, Santa Fe was gaining a reputation among American artists from the east as an interesting place in which to work and many of the artists who visited the area decided to remain.

The Anglo artists were drawn to Santa Fe and Taos by the natural scenery, the unique quality of the luminous light, and the area’s isolation. Fed by a generation of dime store novels, the painters’ imaginations in turn produced the visual component for what would become the Taos-Santa Fe mystique.” These stylized, transcendent images of Santa Fe were an extremely effective form of unintentional tourist promotion and fueled the beginnings of the Santa Fe tourist industry.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Santa Fe art colony became established and a number of small galleries were established. Although it was not easy for the Anglo artists to support themselves financially, and many of them had to supplement their incomes by relying on other skills to bring in cash, they established a foothold in the community and helped to shape the character of Santa Fe.

The roster of artists who came to paint in the region was impressive. Among the most famous were Andrew Dansburg, Randall Davey, Gustave Baumann, Will Shuster, and Marsden Hartley.

The artist who is most closely associated with Santa Fe and northern New Mexico for the American public is Georgia O’Keefe. O’Keefe first visited Taos in 1929. She soon began to paint in the northern New Mexico area during the summer months and she finally became a resident of Abique, New Mexico in 1949. O’Keefe’s paintings of skulls, hills, flowers, and crosses have become synonymous with New Mexico to many people. One of the most popular current attractions in Santa Fe is the Georgia O’Keefe Museum, which exclusively features her work.

The Santa Fe that we know today, owes its character to the artistic traditions that span the centuries and to the diverse cultural groups that have called the city their home. It is impossible to give credit to the myriad of artists and influences that have touched the community over time. However, it seems clear
that the continuing spirit of creativity will endure in Santa Fe into the foreseeable future and make it a unique place to visit and live within.