

A Roundhouse of Art

New Mexico's circular Capitol is home to an ambitious showcase for the state's artists.



BY WENDY UNDERHILL

Some say Santa Fe, N.M., is more famous as an art capital than a state capital. And there's evidence that's true. Santa Fe is one of the oldest seats of government in the Americas, yet its rich artistic heritage is evident in the city's 240 art galleries and many art institutions, including the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, and the Museum of International Folk Art.

There's also the daily open-air market of Native American artists under the portico of the Palace of the Governors that attracts thousands to this town of only 68,000 people.

Fortunately, art and governance dovetail nicely at the Capitol building, a rich repository of the state's artistic culture and a piece of art itself.

A Circle of Art

Affectionately known as "The Roundhouse," the circular building has not one but two art collections. The first is the

Wendy Underhill covers election issues for NCSL and learned about the legislature's commitment to art during a visit to the New Mexico Capitol.

Capitol Art Collection, an expanding compilation of contemporary work by New Mexican artists. The second is the Governor's Gallery, which presents rotating exhibits relating to New Mexico's history and culture. Together, they offer a two-for-the-price-of-one deal. And since the "price" of visiting the Capitol is *nada*, it is a favorite stop for artsy visitors—as well as legislative junkies.

The Capitol Art Collection is on permanent display throughout the State Capitol Complex. The New Mexico Legislature passed resolutions in 1991 creating the Capitol Art Foundation so artists and collectors could donate paintings and sculptures to enrich the walls of the Roundhouse.

Paula Tackett, former director of the Legislative Council Service, was a driving force behind establishing the foundation. "The diversity and the breadth of the art in this capitol is amazing," Tackett said on "Report From Santa Fe" following her retirement in 2010. "It makes it a wonderful place to work, and I will miss that a lot."

Today, the collection consists of 650 pieces from metalwork, photographs and quilts, to paintings, weavings and mixed media, such as the iconic "Buffalo" by Holly Hughes. Some of it might be called "craft" or "folk art," but not by Cynthia Sanchez, executive director of the Capitol Arts Foundation. To her, it is all "art."



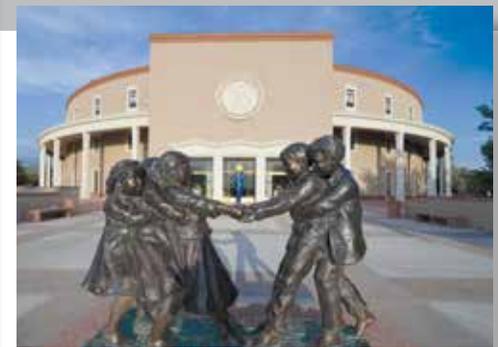
Sundown by Wilson Hurley (opposite)

Self, an oil self-portrait by Bill Wiggins (left)

When Friends Meet, a bronze outdoor sculpture by Allan Houser (below)

Buffalo by Holly Hughes (right)

The Roundhouse, New Mexico's Capitol, photographed by Richard R. Gibson (below, right)



"My philosophy is that if you put something on a wall, you are immediately educating the viewer." The goal of the collection is to preserve, interpret and exhibit local and regional art.

Sanchez is often asked if she offers "educational programs" with the art. The answer is not officially, although she does give tours. Her favorite line on her tours? "This is not a legislative building with an art collection; it's an art museum where they make laws."

It's no surprise the arts are so alive in New Mexico's Capitol. "They've always been a part of our civic culture," says Merry Scully, curator for the Governor's Gallery. "They were significant in terms of gaining statehood and have always been significant in our economy."

Last summer's exhibition, "New Mexico's Art Tells New Mexico's History," drew artwork from the New Mexico Museum of Art's collection to illustrate four themes: Ancestral Peoples, Opening the West, Growing New Mexico and People, Places and Politics.

The art "has to be visually interesting, and the exhibits must tell a story about New Mexico," Scully says. "I want it to appeal to a legislator, a school group and a family from Australia. We really get a range of visitors."

And all the art in the Roundhouse helps visitors feel the hospitality of New Mexico, where the unofficial state motto is *bienvenidos*—welcome!



Art Elsewhere As Well

Oklahoma is another state well-known for showcasing art in its state capitol. The State Art Collection is housed in the first-floor Betty Price Gallery, where changing exhibits are designed to provide a "visual anthology of the history of artistic expression in Oklahoma," according to the Oklahoma Arts Council. The council also manages the Capitol Art Collection, a permanent display featuring more than 100 sculptures, murals and paintings throughout the building's hallways, rotunda and grounds.

And in Massachusetts, Representative Jay Kaufman (D) of Boston runs his own art gallery in the State House, showcasing the work of artists from his district, and occasionally beyond. "I've been doing this for 16 years with whatever wall space is allotted to me," he says. "Happily, I have a 46-foot wall right now, and absent some local talent, it would be a very uninteresting wall." The exhibits change every six to eight weeks, and when it is time for a new installation, it is also time for a wine and cheese reception. "We celebrate the art, and I introduce the artist to my colleagues. It gives them an excuse to come over, see the art and chat."



Representative
Jay Kaufman (D)
Massachusetts