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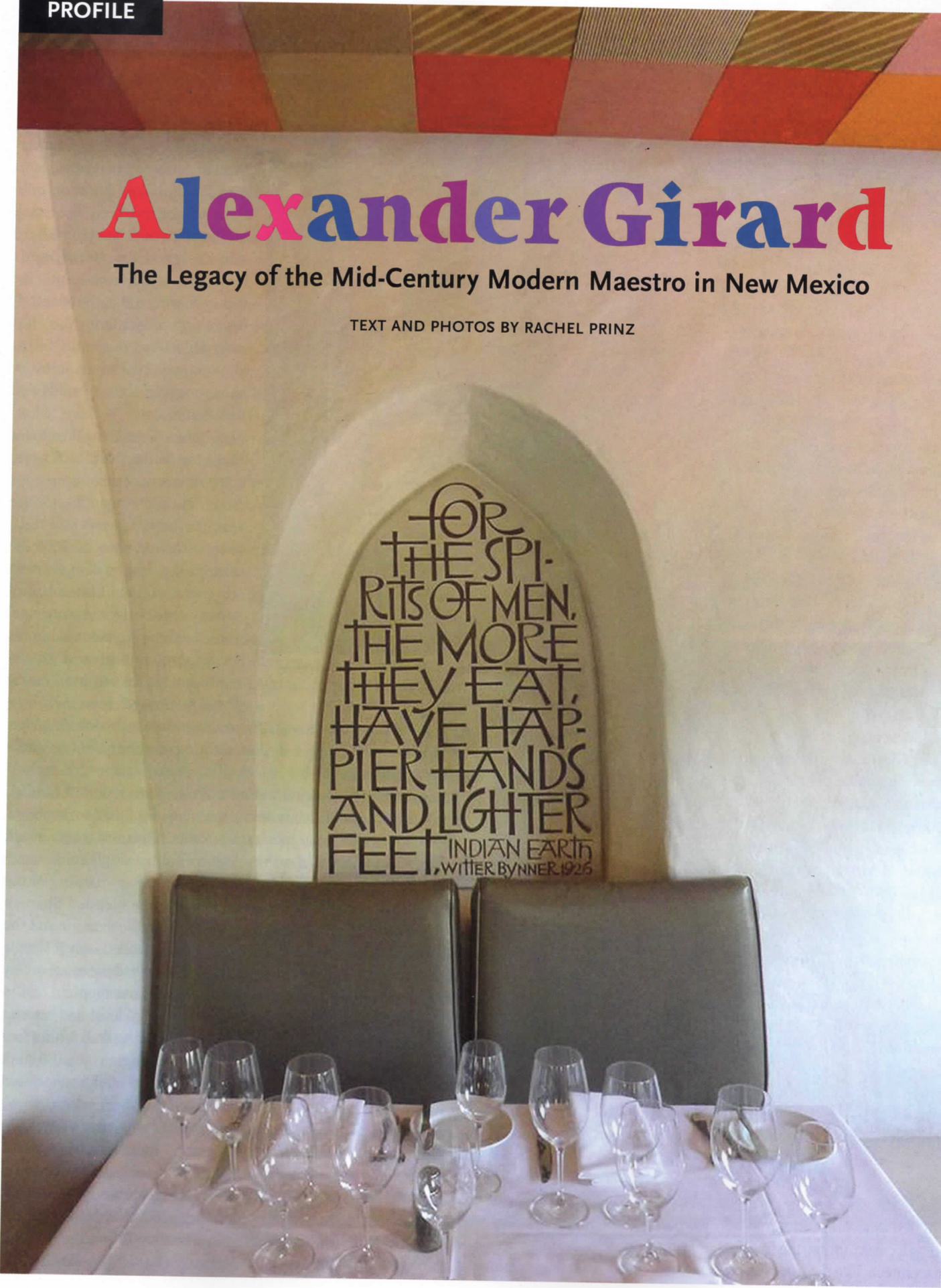
Premier Issue of the Santa Fe Gallery
Association Art Guide Inside



Alexander Girard

The Legacy of the Mid-Century Modern Maestro in New Mexico

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY RACHEL PRINZ



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Artist PROFILE

Renowned designer Alexander “Sandro” Hayden Girard was responsible for some of the Mid-Century Modern era’s most innovative designs in furniture, housewares, and interiors. Much of his work he produced from his studio in Santa Fe, where he moved with his wife and children in 1953. In the years that followed, Girard made an indelible mark on America’s and New Mexico’s artistic and architectural landscape, leaving a legacy that continues to inspire and excite design enthusiasts and visitors alike.

Girard was born in New York City in 1907 and raised in Florence, Italy. His Italian father—a master woodworker and an arts and antiques dealer—was likely a large source of his early inspiration. Girard pursued his formal education at the Royal School of Architecture in Rome and at New York University.

While working in New York in the 1930s, the soft-spoken and serious Girard met and married his wife, Susan Needham March. They were adoring partners, traveling the globe and amassing a folk art collection that would become the largest in the world. Along the way, they also befriended some of the era’s greatest artists and architects, including Eero Saarinen, Charles and Ray Eames, and fellow New Mexico transplant Georgia O’Keeffe.

In his early career, Girard had offices in Florence, New York City, and Detroit and Grosse Point, Michigan. He designed radio bodies and a factory for Detrola Radio, facilities for Ford and Lincoln car companies, furniture for Knoll, and several residences as well. In 1947, in a precursor to several later collaborations of the two masters, Girard joined Saarinen’s team for its award-winning design submission to the St. Louis Gateway competition—the St. Louis Gateway Arch.

Girard’s life changed in 1952 when his friend of nearly 15 years, Charles Eames, offered him the position of Director of the Fabric Division at Herman Miller. It was at this same time—fueled by a passion for folk culture, a desire to be in a suburban environment, and a need to be accessible to his bi-coastal clientele—that Girard moved his family into a nearly 200-year-old hacienda in Santa Fe.

From his office across the dirt road from their home, Girard designed lines for Herman Miller, including furnishings, textiles, and wall coverings for the interiors of Mid-Century Modernist master architects like George Nelson, Saarinen, and Eames, as well as



Many of the Compound’s customers request and enjoy John Wayne’s favorite table, a corner booth sitting under a smiling silver moon.

a diverse array of projects that ranged from the interior architecture of star-quality restaurants in New York to colorful, worldly interiors to complement the stark Modernism of Saarinen. Girard also designed functional items including a tableware line for Georg Jensen and both the interiors of and products for the Herman Miller Textiles and Objects showroom and Herman Miller showrooms in Grand Rapids and San Francisco.

Although Girard would work for Herman Miller until 1975, he accepted many other commissions from clients throughout the country, including several right here in New Mexico. In 1966, he turned his attention to a complete rebranding of Braniff International Airways, not only creating new and coordinating color schemes for airplane and ground equipment, but also revamping nearly 17,000 company items—everything

from the buttons on the captains’ uniforms to matchbooks, signage, and furniture. He even redesigned the typeface for all of Braniff’s printed materials.

Ten years after moving to Santa Fe, restaurateur Bill Hooten approached Girard to renovate the main house of the McComb residence on Canyon Road into a restaurant. In the 100 years since it had been built, the residence had grown from a single room into a sprawling complex of buildings, inspiring the apt naming of the new restaurant—the Compound. Leaving the blended Spanish Pueblo Revival and Territorial architecture of the exterior and the walled courtyards and gardens alone, Girard added only a simple front entrance *portal*. On the interior, he dismantled the maze of tiny rooms, opening up the space to create an axial arrangement of dining rooms along one side of an open hallway and a bar and exterior patio along the other. He replaced a load-bearing wall with a tree trunk, angled the *bancos* to create personal dining niches, and sunk the bar—a reference to the conversation pit he invented and installed in his own home nearly ten years before.

Girard was playful in the way he treated the whitewashed interior. For decoration, a patchwork of Mexican and Navajo weavings “tiled” the flat ceilings of one, while a ten-foot-long painted snake undulated to dramatic effect along another. Three-dimensional murals and inlaid wood doors were added throughout, and he decorated *nichos* and stands with pieces from his own folk art collection. Girard designed the table settings as well, placing white china

against crisp ecru tablecloths, finishing the *bancos* in faux leather, and designing a curvilinear white oak chair for additional seating. And again, he designed a personalized alphabet for the menus and signs. When completed, *Architectural Forum* deemed the Compound, “The Town’s Newest and Best Restaurant.” Today, it is the last of the Girard-designed restaurants in operation, and nearly 50 years after its opening still maintains a reputation for exceptional dining and service.

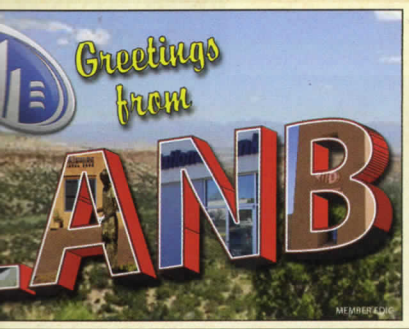
Another of Girard’s renowned New Mexico projects is his mosaic/mural for the sanctuary of the First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque. The sanctuary was designed in 1964 by Harvey Hoshouer, an MIT graduate, former Girard employee, and collaborator with such legendary architects as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Harry Weese, and I.M. Pei. Hoshouer hired Girard to design an altarpiece for this starkly modern space, a 40’ x 8’ mosaic comprised of 5000 wood tiles harvested from abandoned barns purchased from ranchers in the Jemez Mountains and spotted by Girard’s son Marshall at horseback riding camp. Father and son hand-disassembled each barn, starting with the roof, stacking each board with cardboard between, and loading as many trailers as it took to get the barn down to Santa Fe. The wood was cut into three-inch squares by a church member and installed into an arrangement of colors, shades, and symbols by Girard’s team. The colors are original to their reclaimed condition, and include tar-scarred roof sheathing and stained and painted details. Completed in 1965, the mural depicts 22 symbols representing the wisdom of the world’s religions.

The First Unitarian mural was not Girard’s first or last. He also designed the 180-foot-long, three-dimensional *Reflections of an Era* mural for Saarinen’s John Deere headquarters in Moline, Illinois. Girard and five other team members scoured antique shops throughout the United States to collect the more than 3000 three-dimensional pieces of company memorabilia dating as far back as 1860 that comprise the mural. Its background, though mostly obscured, is also reclaimed wood.

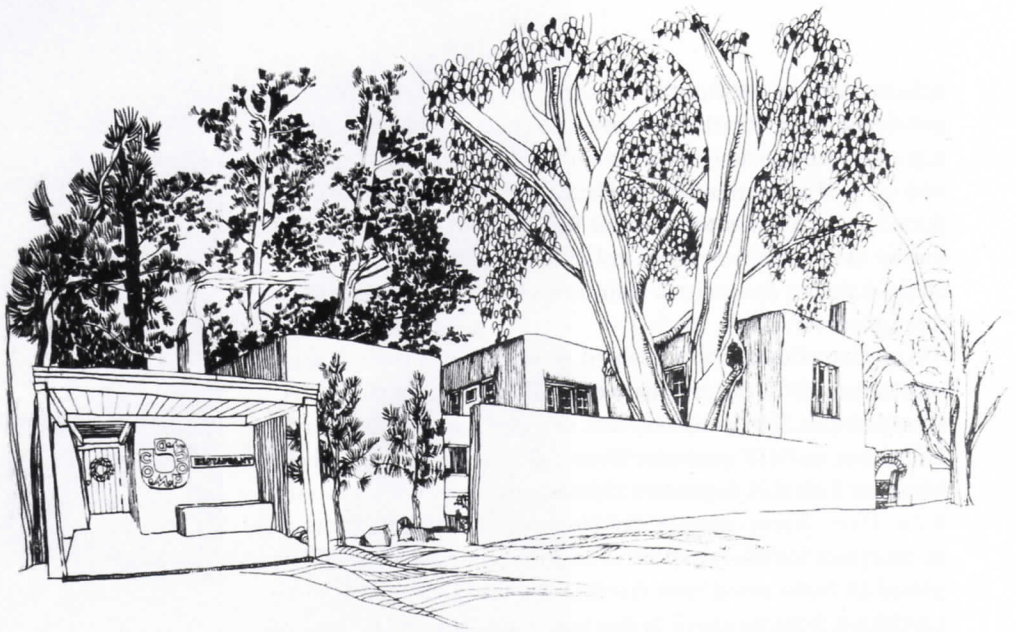
Girard’s design for the *Multiple Visions: A Common Bond* exhibit at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe showcases nearly 10,000 of his and Susan’s folk art pieces. The exhibit, located in an addition to the museum’s original John Gaw Meem structure designed by Hoshouer, first opened in 1982 and captivates with unique displays that engage not only the art itself, but our response to it, asking us to confront our intellectual and emotional mindsets by illuminating ideas of sameness, difference, and perspective. In placing the collection’s multitude of objects into unexpected arrangements, or locating pieces in places we may not have predicted and not explaining any of it, Girard seems to suggest that color, pattern, and language—and therefore ideas—are perhaps more fluid than we may have believed. As if illustrating this, the entrance to the exhibit quotes an old Italian proverb often quoted by Girard: “*Tutto il mondo e paese*” or “The



Girard’s design for the *Multiple Visions: A Common Bond* exhibit at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe. Nearly 10,000 of his and Susan’s folk art pieces are showcased here.



**Artist
PROFILE**



Drawing of the Compound restaurant exterior.

**CONVENIENT
LOCATIONS**



Los Alamos
Trinity Drive
Los Alamos, NM 87544



White Rock
77 Rover Boulevard
Los Alamos, NM 87544



Santa Fe Galisteo
Galisteo Street
Santa Fe, NM 87505



Santa Fe Downtown
301 Griffin Street
Santa Fe, NM 87501



Santa Fe Cerrillos
Cerrillos Road
Santa Fe, NM 87507



Albuquerque Jefferson
6801 Jefferson NE, #300
Albuquerque, NM 87109

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whole world is one hometown.”

After his death in 1993, Susan Girard unsuccessfully attempted to find a writer to prepare a retrospective on her husband’s work. When she passed on several years later, their children searched for someone to commit themselves to their father’s legacy and tell his story. They eventually found Todd Oldham, a renowned designer in his own right, whose family homestead in Abiquiu gave him an understanding of the New Mexican culture Girard had “left civilization” in which to immerse himself. Oldham had previously produced design compendiums of Charley Harper and Joan Jett; had collaborated with legends Michael Graves, Camille Paglia, Amy Sedaris, and John Waters; and produced design studies on Mid-Century Modern aesthetics, embroidery, collage, and fabric printing and dyes. The Girard family recognized him as an excellent fit. With help from Girard’s children and grandchildren, in 2011 Oldham and writer Keira Coffee produced an exceptional monograph. In the 664-page tome, titled *Alexander Girard*, Coffee states, “In his lifetime Girard created not just a new style but a style of looking at things. He raised questions about how we make things, how we notice them, whether things speak to us or we speak to them. From the beginning of his career, Girard had an interest in the concord between lines, objects, colors.

He disregarded trends and went to work showing others his discoveries.”

Throughout his career, Girard created thousands of simple, elegant, and colorful designs for the humanist Mid-Century Modern aesthetic. He was more concerned with eliciting a feeling for the space than in intellectualizing the design. One newspaper of the time noted, “If Girard did it, it’s not just another anything.” Perhaps because of this, unlike much of the design of the period, Girard’s work is still venerated: his fonts and typographies have been reinvigorated by House Industries in the form of blocks, games, puzzles, and nativity sets; Elektra introduced a bicycle with Girard details; and MaXimo Design, Urban Outfitters, and Anna Sui have Girard details in their collections.

Although he was an internationally renowned designer, New Mexico was Girard’s spiritual as well as literal home. Through their use of reclaimed barn wood from the Jemez Mountains, the First Unitarian Church mural in Albuquerque, the patio doors of the Compound restaurant in Santa Fe, and the Girard exhibition space at the Museum of International Folk Art all illustrate the connectedness Girard felt to New Mexico’s landscape and history. That reflection of age-old traditions reinterpreted in a modern way remains one of the most timeless and engaging aspects of his work. ✪