



Variacion Nuevo Mexico at the Albuquerque Museum before (2015) and after (2016) conservation

Variacion Nuevo Mexico Gets a Makeover

On a clear fall day in 2015, a handful of City employees and contractors in neon vests stand in a circle around “Big Blue,” the affectionate nickname for *Variacion Nuevo Mexico*, Mexican artist Sebastian’s massive steel sculpture on the north side of the Albuquerque Museum. At 26 years old, the multi-ton monument is in need of a face lift. After three decades standing outside in the New Mexico sun, who wouldn’t?



Variacion Nuevo Mexico as first installed

Options are weighed and timelines are discussed. “Automotive or marine? We should get three samples,” calls a man in a safety vest, inspecting the sculpture’s sunburnt painted surface.

An old newspaper clipping about the sculpture’s last restoration is passed around. Memories from that experience are tossed back and forth, alternately receiving laughs and groans. It will be a lot of work (about a year’s worth), but the group’s attitude is positive. The Museum and the Public Art Program will work together to get *Variacion Nuevo Mexico* looking like new.

A Gateway to Art and History

In 1989, the City of Albuquerque Public Art Urban Enhancement Program and the Albuquerque Museum jointly purchased *Variacion Nuevo Mexico* from internationally-renowned Mexican sculptor, Sebastian. This work, along with the monumental bronze, *The Shepherd*, by Lincoln Fox (who also sculpted *Dream of Flight*, the 15-foot-high figure between concourses at the

Sunport), forms a gateway to the museum from Mountain Road.

While Fox's representational, larger-than-life Basque shepherd (complete with lambs, crook, and sheepdog) requires little analysis from its audience, it's pairing with the jutting abstract forms of *Variacion* may give some viewers pause. That's deliberate. The two works were commissioned for a remodel of the museum grounds, and represent what Albuquerque Museum visitors will find inside the institution: the art and history of New Mexico through the centuries.

Variations on a Theme

Sebastian drew inspiration from New Mexico's natural and built environment for *Variacion Nuevo Mexico*. The stacks of cubes on the sculpture's northwest side allude to the architecture of Taos Pueblo, while the sweeping buttresses on its southeast side draw from adobe churches like San Jose de Garcia in Las Trampas or Albuquerque's own San Felipe de Neri in nearby Old Town. The forms join together in a great blue archway, inspired by our state's inimitable, often cloudless skies.



The Shepherd by Lincoln Fox

Keeping Up Appearances

With great art must also come great responsibility; It's a credo that both the Public Art Program and the Albuquerque Museum adhere to. It may sound surprising, but the Albuquerque Public Art Program is one of the few 1% for Art programs in the nation that dedicate a portion of their budgets to the maintenance and upkeep of their collections. Albuquerque's Art in Public Places ordinance maintains that up to 20% of the 1% funds can be used for conservation. The museum, on the other hand, derives its conservation funds from a number of sources including grants and support from the Albuquerque Museum Foundation.

Just Like New

Conservation work was completed in the summer of 2016, and today *Variacion Nuevo Mexico* is looking refreshed, its smooth blue surfaces free of rust, its foundation restored and reinforced, surrounded by a new xeric landscape. Stop by and take a little time to appreciate this work and the other great works in the Albuquerque Museum Sculpture Garden the next time you are in Old Town.