

Something important to keep in mind is that art colonies also develop good salesmen.

One morning in San Miguel de Allende, I had a mighty close call. Near the plaza, in an old adobe home, an elderly lady had baited an easel with a Peruvian painting which, she hinted, went so far back into the antiquity of her country that when the natives were freed from the Spanish colonizers the latter must have overlooked the works in their retreat.

"The rosewood frame alone is worth more than a whole row of my other displays," she said. "Senor, you will be across the line and past customs before the officials are recovered from seeing such a treasure. What you will save in duties will more than pay the paltry amount I'll charge for packing the picture."

Blood began to rush to my head and my mouth went completely dry. I flexed the fingers of my right hand and was instantly aware of every travelers check number in my reserve.

So shaken that I was unable to make a trade at that moment, I excused myself, against her wishes. Down the street, I strayed into an unlikely cubicle of a dress shop where another grey headed lady was stitching a skirt on a foot-pedal sewing machine.

Hanging on the walls of the small shop was a collection of old branding irons that had been in her husband's estate. These relics instantly forced me to admit that mutton lambs and black steer calves convert into art works at about the same speed that deep sea divers get rich hunting buried treasure.

Just the sight of those irons and that poor woman sewing on that old machine saved me from a long pay-out on a credit card. It's a dead cinch the art dealer will never have to take in sewing. Later that afternoon I found a duplicate of that same frame in a shop by the market.