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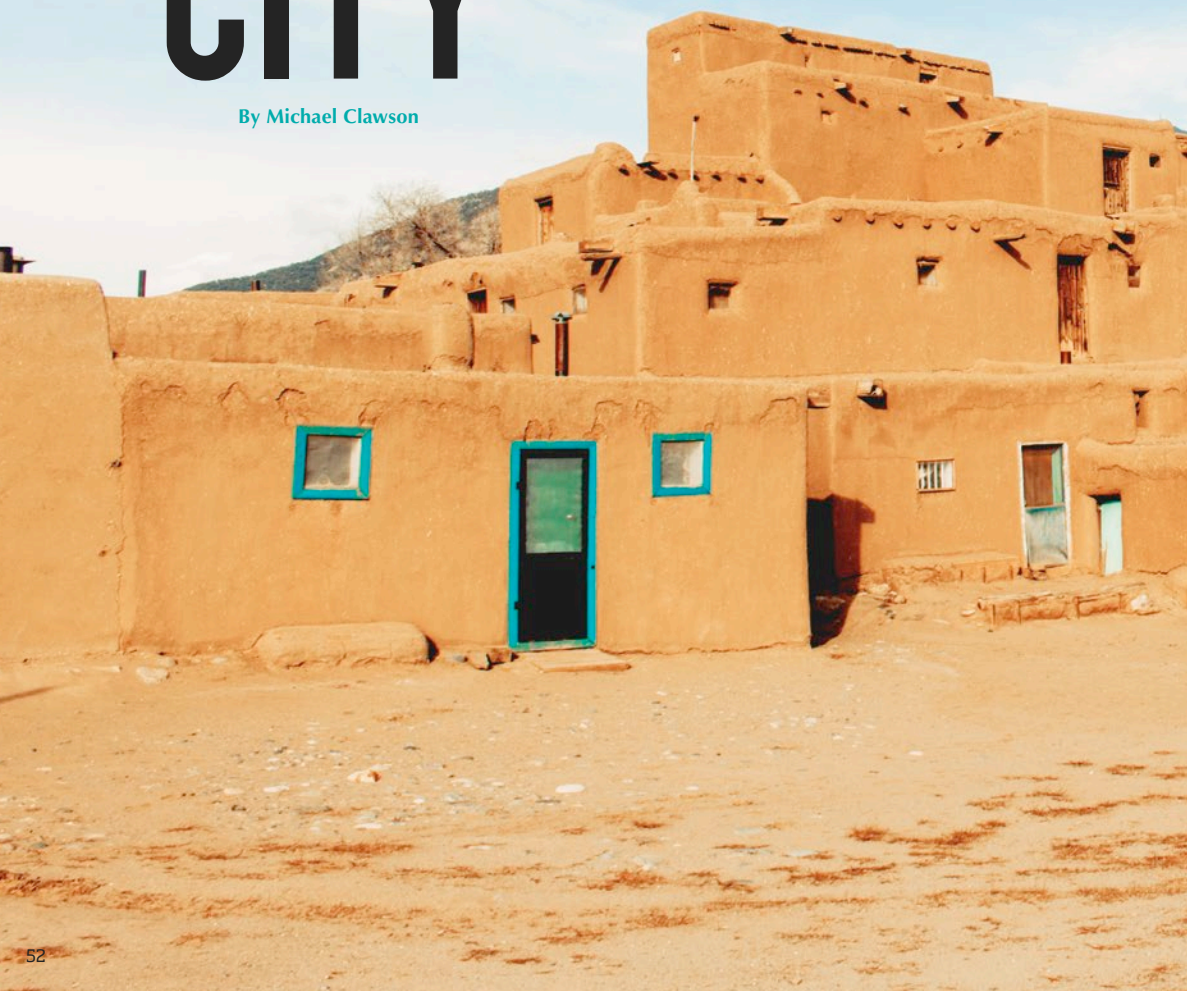
WESTERN ART COLLECTOR



THE LIVING CITY

By Michael Clawson

Taos has its roots in tradition and history, but a new generation is proving that the Northern New Mexico destination is also looking to the future.



Over the course of nearly 1,000 years of human occupation, Taos, New Mexico, has encountered a variety of natural and man-made phenomena, each one a catalyst of change: A 13th-century drought. Spanish colonization in the 17th century. The arrival of additional European settlers. The Taos Society of Artists. The modernist and transcendentalist painters who followed. Dennis Hopper, *Easy Rider* and the '60s counterculture. Poor economies and languid growth. A recession. Hipsters, airports and trendy dining.

And yet for nearly 1,000 years, despite the threat of change at every turn, Taos has remained largely...well, Taos—unmistakable in its place within the fabric of North American culture. There's a reason the town's nickname is the Soul of the Southwest.

Now, like many times in the past, Taos is undergoing a subtle transformation, one that will bring about another chapter. One of the epicenters of this next chapter is at the Couse-Sharp Historic Site, where executive director and curator Davison Packard Koenig is helping to align many stars for the site's next great project, the Lunder Research Center, a repository and archive for all things related to the Taos Society of Artists. The center will house a comprehensive archive related to the TSA, including the Couse materials, a treasure trove of sales records, hand sketches, sketchbooks, 8,000 nitrate negatives used as reference for paintings and countless objects. For scholars researching the TSA, or more broadly Taos, the research center will be the center of the universe. For Koenig, who's excited to bring new generations of researchers to the site, Taos has

long been a place where cultures converge, and the research center will exemplify that element.

"Taos was this sleepy Spanish town with a Pueblo next door. The arrival of Kit Carson and the trappers, as well as a small Anglo population in the 1800s, really put Taos on the map. Traders and trappers were aware of Taos as a trade center, also because Taos had pretty mild winters compared to the Northern Rockies. And then in 1893 you get Joseph Henry Sharp doing his first trip here. He later meets [Ernest] Blumenschein, [Eanger Irving] Couse and [Bert Geer] Phillips in Paris and tells them they need to take a look. Later Blumenschein and Phillips have their fated wagon trip to Taos," Koenig says, referring to the trip that ended with a broken wagon wheel that led the two men to stick around and eventually help create the Taos Society of Artists. "When they arrive



The Taos Pueblo, with a history that spans 1,000 years, is considered the oldest continuously inhabited communities in the country. Photo courtesy Visit Taos / Rebecca Hicks



Ashley Rolshoven, director and co-owner of Robert L. Parsons Fine Art. Photograph by Daniel Nadelbach.

it's still a sleepy town—no running water or electricity, and the train never goes to Taos. There was the High Road to Taos, but it took a long time, so when you came here you stayed a while. Later Mabel Dodge Luhan shows up and things started to happen for it to become this cultural juggernaut. Then people like D.H. Lawrence, Georgia O'Keeffe and the railroad. It changed very, very fast."

Largely unchanged today, though, is the Couse-Sharp site—"We see it eventually as a whole campus," Koenig adds—which is made up of nine buildings, including Couse's home and studio; Sharp's first and second Taos studio, including the 1835 Luna Chapel; and the

recently purchased Mission Gallery, which will eventually house the Lunder Research Center. In a town filled with historic sites—including the Taos Art Museum at Fechin House, the Harwood Museum, the Kit Carson Home and Museum and many others—the Couse-Sharp site has become an intriguing focal point, especially in the way it brings in contemporary artists, including Native American artists from Taos Pueblo, as well as art collectors, history buffs and even just casual art enthusiasts taking a day off from the slopes in Taos Ski Valley. It's also bringing in the next generation with coveted artists in residency programs for artists and immersive internships for scholars and art

historians, as well as doctoral programs.

But even with a growing well of resources to draw from, Koenig says that Taos still has to work twice as hard as other New Mexican towns to bring people in. And the town and its residents are up to the challenge. "We're slower paced here in Taos and because of that Taos has a different quality of life than places like Santa Fe. And yet, for many people, we're relegated to a day trip from Santa Fe, when a day here doesn't begin to reveal all that's special here. We encourage people to come and stay for a few days or more and really engage with our past and our story. Don't just do the day trip from Santa Fe. Come and stay and see how important Taos is to the world," he says, adding that tourist dollars are not taken for granted in a town with a population under 6,000, which is why all the galleries, museums and other destinations work so closely to bring people in. "All the museums and cultural institutions have worked together now more than ever. Whether it's a museum, a literary group, an archaeological society or cultural organization, we all plan stuff together so we don't hold events on the same night. We're all trying to build something together, and you can start to see it come to fruition now. This is the next transformation of Taos. It's hard to say what it is going to be now, but I definitely think we'll all discover what it is together as we make a better, more sustainable community."

These sentiments are echoed by Caroline Jean Fernald, the executive director at the Millicent Rogers Museum, an institution just north of Taos that is dedicated to Millicent Rogers, the influential advocate and tastemaker of early Southwestern culture. Fernald, who interned at the Couse-Sharp Historic Site in 2016 through the University of Oklahoma, remembers her first trip into Taos from Oklahoma. "My first day in Taos was my first day of my internship. I took the High Road and was immediately struck at the beauty—it was unlike anything I had seen before," she says. "Taos is working on a very strategic plan, and one of the things I've gathered from the process is that Taos may move a little slower and be a little smaller and everyone wants to see business thriving, but we don't want to be Santa Fe. It's just such a uniquely different experience. Taos has its own presence."

Fernald says that change happens very slow in Taos, and sometimes it's not always wanted by residents. A recent airport expansion, for instance, took nearly 30 years to finally happen, and even as Taos Pueblo dancers were dedicating a runway that can now accommodate commercial jets, many residents



Parsons Gallery of the West, which is located in the former home and studio of Victor Higgins.



Jerry Jordan, *The Music of Yellow Leaves*, oil, 36 x 36". Available at Parsons Gallery of the West.

were concerned about traffic, pollution and airplane noise. (One agreement that was made, to cheers from all parties, was that planes would not be able to fly below 5,000 feet over Pueblo land.) Other changes may be smaller, but their impacts can be measured, including increased web presence by many galleries and museums, as well as the presence of online-friendly businesses like Airbnb, Lyft and Uber, though Fernald recommends experiencing Taos the way locals do, at a slower, more genial pace.

One of the museum's proudest achievements—besides its 6,000-item collection that focuses on the Native and Hispanic cultures that have influenced Taos for centuries—is its frequent showcase of Taos Pueblo artists, which shows locals and visitors alike that the Taos Pueblo is a living community, not just a static display in a textbook or museum exhibit. "The artists never left Taos. They are still there and still making artwork," she says, adding that they have shown work from sculptors Larry Bell and John Suazo, painter Jonathan Warm Day Coming and fashion designer Patricia Michaels, as well as many others. Additionally, the museum has partnered with the Taos Pueblo on numerous exhibitions and events, including San Geronimo Feast Day held every September 30.

"Even with all the skiing and the outdoor activities, Taos is still an art town. And it's commendable that we all work together in



Davison Koenig, executive director and curator at the Couse-Sharp Historic Site in Taos. Photograph by Daniel Nadelbach.



The entryway at the Couse-Sharp Historic Site, which features homes and studios of Eanger Irving Couse and Joseph Henry Sharp.

the community. The galleries and museums actually all like each other, and we get along. We want to make our schedules work together and be supportive," Fernald adds. "It's not so cutthroat here."

Another young mover and shaker in Taos is Ashley Rolshoven, director and co-owner of Robert L. Parsons Fine Art, a historic gallery, and Parsons Gallery of the West, its contemporary sister in the former home and studio of Victor Higgins. Rolshoven, the stepdaughter of gallery founder Robert Parsons and a distant relative of TSA member Julius Rolshoven, grew up in Taos and is in love with the rich culture of the town. "My career goals have been to preserve traditional Taos art here in Taos. And not just any art, but a high level of art, to carry that on to future generations," she says. "It just seems like Western art is for an older generation, so it's been fun and challenging bringing it to younger collectors."

She says that young people are living in Taos at the right time. "This younger generation is experiencing it in a new way. There are so many opportunities here, whether it's working for a museum, owning a gallery, starting a restaurant... And there's so much here to do and enjoy. There are more great restaurants here per capita than



Chloe Marie Gaillard, *Women Riding in the Field of Sage*, oil, 12 x 16". Available at Parsons Gallery of the West.



Caroline Jean Fernald, executive director at the Millicent Rogers Museum in Taos. Photograph by Daniel Nadelbach.

I've ever experienced in another small town. There's food, music, arts...it's really a mecca for creative people," Rolshoven says. "Young people were uncertain where Taos was headed a decade or so ago, but young people are taking charge and leading it in their own direction."

One thing Parsons is doing, Rolshoven specifically, is bringing artists to Taos to see its beauty. And not just day trips, but thoughtful and involved visits that allow them to explore the Taos Pueblo, the Rio Grande Gorge, the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and other landmarks that captivated Couse, Sharp and Blumenschein more than a century ago. Two artists she's worked with recently were Mark Maggiori and Logan Maxwell Hagege, both of whom came out and worked with Rolshoven on day trips, live painting models and photography sessions. The two California artists left with a profound sense of Taos' greatness and reference material for several major paintings.

"My first trip to Taos was sometime around 2002-2003. Taos has always been a location that I wanted to visit. So much great art was produced there and I figured there had to be something special about the place," Hagege says. "I instantly feel a special energy when I visit Taos. The Pueblo and its people, the light,



The Millicent Rogers Museum near Taos, New Mexico.

the landscape, all of it is so special. There are certain places that artists have on their list to visit and Taos is definitely at the top of this list."

Rolshoven also shows works from many other artists with strong connections to Taos, including Jerry Jordan, Julian Robles, Dean Porter, Brett Allen Johnson and Chloe Marie Gaillard. The glory days of the Taos Society of Artists are over, but a new generation of artists

is still being inspired by the color, the light, the people and the land of Taos.

"Taos is one of the last great places in this country. People here take a lot of great measures to keep it that way. We don't want to become super enormous. We want to see it grow, but not change so much," Rolshoven says. "This is one of the last places of the Wild West, and it still feels very pure—pure Taos." 🌿