



Couse-Sharp Historic Site: Preserving the past and contributing to the future

BY CINDY BROWN



Visiting the Couse-Sharp Historic Site on Kit Carson Road offers a glimpse into the past of Taos. Most important about this view into history is the way this place gives shape and meaning to the present and future of our community.

The site includes the gardens, home and studios of both Eanger Irving (E.I.) Couse and Joseph Henry (J.H.) Sharp, both founding members of the Taos Society of Artists. Soon a museum, archive and research facility known as the Lunder Research Center will be added to preserve documents, photographs, art and artifacts of the 12 members of the Taos Society of Artists.

Together the different elements of the site tell the story of how Couse and Sharp became part of the Taos community of 100 years ago, building strong ties to the Hispano and Native cultures. Taos Pueblo residents served as models for paintings by the artists and became close personal friends as well. Today that connection continues with a strong partnership with the Pueblo that has included fine art exhibitions featuring Native artists and visits to the historic site by Taos Pueblo Day School students. On these tours, Taos Pueblo artists, including designer Patricia Michaels and painter Ryan Suazo, accompany the student and convey their own perspectives and stories.

THE PAST

The Taos Society of Artists (TSA) was founded in 1915 with six members; Couse was its first president. Ultimately the group grew to 12 artists drawn here from all over the country. Through their art, the TSA artists captured the magic of Taos — the valley, the mountains, the phenomenal light and the indigenous culture. “TSA members had a desire to create a uniquely American art,” says Couse-Sharp Executive Director and Curator Davison Packard Koenig.

The artists also helped transform the view of the nation regarding Native peoples. Working together, the painters and models became agents of social change. Native people were depicted with humanity — as hunters, farmers, artists and mothers with their children. “The people in the portraits were not just models — they were friends,” Koenig says. “The artists strove to depict not only the external appearance, but also the inner lives of the people.”

E.I. Couse first came to Taos in 1902. In 1909, he and his wife, Virginia, bought a house on Kit Carson Road that was constructed beginning in 1839, and they immediately began to add to it. Today, the Couse House is much the same as when he lived here with dishes, personal effects and Spanish Colonial furniture still in the rooms. His studio looks as he left it with an unfinished painting on the easel. Visitors see his

extensive collections of locally made santos, Pueblo pottery and other Native art and artifacts.

J.H. Sharp, who first visited Taos in 1893, bought a former dance hall in 1908 and turned it into his home. The next year, he purchased the Luna family chapel to become his studio. The chapel is now used as temporary exhibit space and currently features a show titled “Taos Pueblo Portraiture: The Photographic Studies of E.I. Couse,” through November 2.

In 1915, behind his home, which later became the Mission Gallery, Sharp built his second Taos studio, now with a permanent rotating exhibition devoted to his life and work. The studio is full of his paintings of Native people and artifacts he collected.

Couse’s only son, Kibbey, and his family moved home to help Couse after Virginia died in 1929. Kibbey was an inventor whose workshop, laboratory and machine shop are preserved and give the site the nearly unique distinction of featuring not only art and cultural history but also science and engineering history.

When E.I. Couse passed away in 1936, the house was shuttered, and the collections largely left intact. Sharp had no children and arranged for control of his property to pass to Kibbey and his children.

Couse’s granddaughter Virginia Couse Leavitt and her late husband, Ernie, realized what a treasure the site and contents were. They worked in the summers to preserve the property, gave free tours to those drawn to the house and eventually established the Couse Foundation in 2001. The Couse Foundation raised money for several years to help with preservation and in 2012 purchased the site; the family donated the contents.

“There is a long, unbroken chain of love and care for this place, and at the heart is the Couse family,” says Regina McAskill Scherffius, program manager. “Now others have become as passionate as they’ve been about the treasures of the historic site. They’ve extended the family.”

In 2016, momentum for further developing the site began to build with the hiring of Koenig, formerly curator of exhibits at the Arizona State Museum in Tucson, the oldest and largest anthropology museum of the Southwest. “The moment I stepped onto the property, I knew I wanted to be part of this exciting project,” says Koenig.

Plans to establish an archive and research center moved toward reality when the Mission Gallery, which incorporated the last remnants of Sharp’s home, closed its doors and the Couse Foundation purchased the building. Helped by a grant from the Lunder Foundation of Portland, Maine, it will be remodeled

and become The Lunder Research Center to include archives, exhibition space and offices.

TODAY

To complete the 5,000-square-foot research center and realize its expanded vision, the Couse Foundation is raising funds. About \$1.7 million has been raised toward a goal of \$3 million. Henry Architects of Arroyo Seco is designing the space, and completion is expected June 2021. A capital campaign kicks off this fall to work toward that goal and also to fund an endowment to sustain the site into the future.

The community is invited to find out more about the project by attending an open house on Saturday, Sept. 7, from 3-5 p.m. This will be a “hard hat” tour and visitors will be able to see the changes underway.

THE FUTURE

The completed Couse-Sharp Historic Site campus will benefit Taos by continuing its multicultural collaboration and sharing this tradition with the world. The site will draw researchers and visitors to find out more about the art of Couse, Sharp and the other members of the Taos Society of Artists. Continuing the foundation’s emphasis on scholarship as evidenced through its publication of multiple books, a planned initiative is to establish live-work spaces on the campus for college interns, scholars in residence and artists in residence.

“The story of the Couse-Sharp Historic Site is not only the story of the artists, but also the connections they made in the community and their commitment to understanding and illustrating the cultures of Taos. These artists and their Native models played a significant role in changing prevailing perceptions of Native peoples,” says Koenig. “It is a national story and it is a deeply Taos story, one of cultural respect and friendship. It looks to the past but also into the future. Being present in the moment and telling real stories are more important than ever.”

MORE ABOUT THE COUSE FOUNDATION

The work of the foundation is guided by a dedicated board of directors. More than 50 volunteers form the organization’s backbone, guiding tours and helping to operate the site. Tours are available by appointment Monday through Saturday.

From June through October, there are two-hour open houses on the first Saturday of the month with exhibits and programs such as artist demonstrations, talks and book signings.

To become involved, visit the website couse-sharp.org or call (575) 751-0369.

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Community Against Violence
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Creative Framing Taos
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Taos Community Foundation
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