

# All in the Family: Taos's Couse Foundation

BY BETSY THOMAS



E.I. Couse in his studio, c. 1926  
Photo: Couse Family Archives



The founders of the Taos Society of Artists, 1915  
Left to right: Bert G. Phillips, W. Herbert Dunton, Joseph Henry Sharp,  
Oscar E. Berninghaus, Eanger Irving Couse, Ernest L. Blumenschein

In the tiny town of Taos, nestled high in the mountains of northern New Mexico, sits an enchanting property. Though street views of it are unassuming, just beyond the simple walls and entrance lies an artistic treasure — the studio home of the painter Eanger Irving Couse (1866–1936). Celebrated for his stoic, introspective portrayals of local Native Americans, Couse was a trailblazer in forming one of America's earliest art colonies; indeed, he became the first president of the Taos Society of Artists when it was officially established in 1915. A photograph of its members shows Couse on his porch with Joseph Henry Sharp, Ernest L. Blumenschein, W. Herbert Dunton, Bert G. Phillips, and Oscar E. Berninghaus. Over the next 12 years, the Society's traveling exhibitions introduced the country to a uniquely American art form hailed by collectors and critics alike.<sup>1</sup>

Purchased in 1909 by Couse and his wife, Virginia, as a permanent residence, the old adobe house on Kit Carson Road required only a few alterations — most importantly the enlargement of a south wing that would become Couse's studio. Until recently, the house was run privately by the artist's grand-

daughter, the art historian Virginia Couse Leavitt, and her husband, Ernest Leavitt. Through their dedicated efforts, the site has been added to the National Register of Historic Places and designated a National Trust Historic Artist's Home and Studio. Concerned about the property's future, the Leavitts partnered with a few key supporters to form the Couse Foundation in 2001. While their main motivation was to preserve the structure and every object, document, and painting inside it, they also recognized the site's huge potential to educate the public by offering an authentic glimpse inside the early Taos art community.

Set against a mountain backdrop of dramatic vistas and an ever-changing kaleidoscope of light, this property is unique in several respects. First, while most historic homes in Taos have been demolished or modified, the Couse property has survived intact — from its architectural footprint to the design of the surrounding landscape. Because it has descended within the same family, its furnishings, artworks, archival materials, and other contents appear exactly as Couse left them upon his death in 1936. Second, the site is uniquely tied to another Taos Society member, Joseph Henry

Sharp, who lived in the adjacent home. Before he died in 1953 without heirs, Sharp sold his property to Couse's son, Kibbey; this transaction included his two studios, one of which had previously been the Luna Chapel. Thus the combined properties are now called the Couse-Sharp Historic Site.

To pass through the simple doorway of the Couse House is to step back in time. From the garden, a covered porch leads to various rooms. Entering the living room, with its large hearth, visitors are greeted by a masterpiece of Couse's early period, *All Saints' Day at Enocq*, painted in 1895 in France, where he spent six years pursuing the rigorous curriculum at the Académie Julien under William Bouguereau. Couse's formative years there served him well, as he was invited to show at the prestigious Paris Salon.<sup>2</sup>

Although his later Western scenes' explorations of light, color, and subject matter marked a sharp departure from his early style, Couse fully retained his academic ideals and lifelong commitment to figurative painting. Upon returning to the U.S. in 1896, he made it his mission to paint the American Indian. This fascination originated with the



E.I. Couse (1866-1936)  
**Decorating the War Shield**  
 1902, Oil on canvas,  
 24 x 29 in.  
 On offer at the Coeur d'Alene Art  
 Auction on July 26  
 (cdaartauction.com)  
 Estimated to fetch \$250,000-  
 350,000



E.I. Couse (1866-1936)  
**All Saints' Day at Enocq**  
 1895, Oil on canvas, 50 x 60 in.  
 Couse Foundation  
 Photo: Laurence K. Gustafson



E.I. Couse (1866-1936)  
**The Water Bottle**  
 1929, Oil on canvas on board, 20 x 24 in.  
 Private collection, courtesy Zaplin-Lampert Gallery, Santa Fe



The exterior and restored garden of the E.J. Couse Home  
Photo: Ernest E. Leavitt



The interior of Couse's studio today  
Photo: Lawrence K. Gustafson

tribes he encountered while living on his wife's family ranch in the state of Washington.<sup>3</sup> Virginia Leavitt writes that Couse's "decision to paint Native Americans reflected his conviction that they were the only uniquely American subject matter available to this country's figure painters."<sup>4</sup>

Couse's spacious studio emanates an atmosphere of quiet concentration. Arrayed along a high shelf running its full perimeter is his impressive collection of Pueblo pots, which featured prominently in his paintings alongside other props still displayed here. Here, too, is the wooden platform on which models posed while he sat at his easel nearby. Couse forged crucial friendships with Indians from the neighboring pueblo, particularly Jerry Mirabal and Ben Lujan (who became his favorite model and appeared in countless oils such as *The Water Bottle*). In his later years, the Indians nicknamed Couse "Green Mountain" on account of his hefty size and familiar green sweater.<sup>5</sup>

Today Ginnie Couse Leavitt faithfully sustains her family's mission of caring for the property, the chief challenge being to stabilize and modernize the infrastructure without disturbing the original patina. It is no small job to preserve and document her grandfather's vast holdings of letters, photographs, and artifacts, even while pursuing her ongoing catalogue raisonné project. In 1980, the Leavitts quite accidentally discovered in a darkened corner a previously unknown cache of well preserved nitrate negatives taken by Couse; this brought his photographic archive count up to approximately 10,000 items. For scholars, it remains an almost incredible find that deepens our collective understanding of how Couse used photographs as source material for his paintings. Amazingly, most of the negatives' boxes were labeled and

numbered, and some prints bear pencil marks proving that they had been gridded for transfer to canvas.<sup>6</sup>

The Couse Foundation's leaders are working hard to engage a wider audience and deepen public understanding of the Southwest's cultural history. Ever loyal to Taos, priority is given to lectures, workshops, and other outreach programs that directly serve the local community, but a more ambitious and exciting long-term goal is to provide facilities for students and scholars to inspect and use the Foundation's holdings. The Foundation welcomes donations, which are tax-deductible, and also visits to the property between May and October. Anyone planning a visit to Taos is invited to call ahead and make an appointment for a tour. Rest assured, you will be glad you did. ■

Information: 146 Kit Carson Road, Taos, NM 87571, 575.751.0369, [cousefoundation.org](http://cousefoundation.org)

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#### Endnotes

1. Virginia Couse Leavitt, "Eanger Irving Couse," *Southwest Art*, December 1991.
2. *Fleur de Prison* (1888) was admitted to that year's Salon.
3. These tribes were Klinkitat, Yakima, Cayuse, and Umatilla.
4. Virginia Couse Leavitt, *Eanger Irving Couse: Image Maker for America*, Albuquerque Museum of Art, 1991.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*