



# TAOS NEWS

(/)

Search ...



[ADVANCED SEARCH \(/SEARCH.HTML\)](#)

ARTS AND CULTURE

## Painter's eye-opening odyssey through Indian Country

Speaker sheds light on Joseph Henry Sharp's urgency to capture what was quickly disappearing



(/uploads/original/20190612-120114-87996.jpg)

**Artist Joseph Henry Sharp in his studio on Kit Carson Road in Taos. His studio, as well as the studio and home of E.I. Couse, are open to the public as cultural properties known as the Couse-Sharp Historic Site.**

COURTESY COUSE-SHARP HISTORIC SITE



Posted Thursday, June 13, 2019 5:00 am

**By Kathleen Steward**  
**tempo@taosnews.com**

Spending several winters painting in Montana's subzero temperatures, Joseph Henry Sharp (1859-1953) recorded on canvas the perceived end of the Northern Plains Indian civilization. His paintings are considered to impart a rare empathy and respect for the individuals who were regarded as being on the losing side of history.

Marie Watkins will present a lecture titled, " 'So me for the North and snow!' Joseph Henry Sharp's Montana," Saturday (June 15) at 10 a.m. in the Arthur Bell Auditorium at the Harwood Museum of Art, 238 Ledoux Street, Taos.

The lecture is in conjunction with the Couse-Sharp Foundation's sixth Biennial Gala Celebration planned the same day at 5 p.m. at El Monte Sagrado Resort, 317 Kit Carson Road. The sold-out event will feature dinner, entertainment, silent and live auctions to benefit the site and its programs. For more, see the sidebar.

Watkins is professor emerita of art history at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina, and holds a doctorate from Florida State University. She has extensively researched the Taos Society of Artists, zeroing in on Sharp. Among her most recent publications is the essay "The Call of the West: The Art of Joseph Henry Sharp."

"When I first saw Sharp's painting, I didn't know anything about Western art. His are quiet and dignified works using classical imagery."

Sharp and his wife, Addie, first went to Montana in the summer of 1899, taking a break from teaching at the Cincinnati Art Academy and, according to Watkins, they started to go back in earnest during the winters from 1902-1908. Eventually they built a cabin at the Crow Agency.

"This is gutsy what he did," comments Watkins.

When they traveled further afield they used a sheep herder's wagon as a mobile studio. The Sharps dubbed the wagon "Prairie Dog." There remains a black-and-white photograph of Joseph Sharp standing in the snow setting up what looks like an easel. He is bundled to the hilt replete with a feather in his cap - "Prairie Dog" sits behind on an incline.

"Sharp was a driven man," Watkins said. His early life reads like a Horatio Alger book. His parents were first-generation Irish immigrants. Sharp was schooled until the age of 12 when he nearly drowned in an accident that left him deaf. School was out so he went to work in a nail factory, giving part of his wages to his mother.

At age 14 he moved 200 miles from his home in Bridgeport, Ohio, to The McMicken School of Design in Cincinnati, Ohio. It was here he found his footing in art, which spurred his ambition and led in time to the high-brow world of classical painting. He studied in Belgium, Germany, Paris and Spain.

After Sharp's initial foray to Montana, Watkins said he felt he had to get back not only as a painter but also an ethnographer, documenting the rapid decline of a way of life. The implications were urgent, so he put Taos on the back burner.

He painted portraits of many native warriors who fought in the 1876 Battle of the Little Bighorn - known to local Indians as the Battle of the Greasy Grass and to others as Custer's Last Stand - including members of the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Lakota, Blackfoot and Crow nations.

"The history is wrought on their faces; it is fresh," said Davison Packard Koenig, executive director and curator of the Couse-Sharp Historic Site, at 146 Kit Carson Road. "He is able to get access and trust with his integrity and good intentions."

Koenig conjectures that the battle was the 9/11 of its day. Although the Plains Indians won the Battle of the Little Big Horn, within a generation, they lost the war. Sharp was able to paint each man, each warrior with this profound understanding.

After the portraits, Sharp panned back using the winter landscape to contextualize the struggle he witnessed. The barren tree limbs, the earth buried in snow - the scene is stark yet hushed at the same time.

"That man really understood snow," explained Watkins. "The snow scenes to me are the most powerful."

A Crow Indian chief had died and Sharp painted a series of the funeral cortege. The snow is partially melted. There is the universal mourning, the chief's covered body being pulled on a travois, people trailing slowly behind. Death is death. It matters not the cultural, ethnic, spiritual or political systems. And that is what Sharp is able to convey, as Watkins noted earlier - a quiet dignity.

According to Watkins, the reason Sharp chose to travel to the Crow Agency in the winter was because the tribes were now farming and ranching with the bulk of work being done from spring to fall. The winter afforded time for Sharp and Addie to approach communities, to ask people to sit for portraits.

"It was his ethnographic work in Montana that solidified Sharp's career. It changed his life," said Watkins.

The Smithsonian Institution purchased several of his paintings after the exposure Sharp received from his exhibition at the tony Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C.

Two bicoastal philanthropists also recognized the historical significance of Sharp's master paintings. According to Watkins, socialite Phoebe Hearst visited his studio and purchased all of his Montana work for the anthropology museum at the University of California in Berkeley, later named the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology. The trilogy was finalized with iron magnate Joseph Green Butler procuring Sharp's work. Butler is recognized as starting the first museum dedicated solely to American art.

Admission to Watkins' presentation is \$10, \$8 for museum members. For more information, call (575) 758-9826 or visit [harwoodmuseum.org](http://harwoodmuseum.org).

## **Couse-Sharp Historic Site Biennial Gala Celebration**

*Sixth Biennial Gala and Art Auction*

*Saturday (June 15), 5 p.m.*

*El Monte Sagrado Resort, 317 Kit Carson Road*

*Tickets \$175, sold out, however, proxy and remote bidding on auction items are available.*

An elegant evening at El Monte Sagrado Resort, including wine and hors d'oeuvres reception, entertainment, live auction and silent auction, followed by a plated dinner. The live auction features an impressive selection of contemporary Western art and historic selections. Alissa Ford from Heritage Auctions will again act as auctioneer. The silent auction includes curated items such as small paintings, jewelry, pottery, gift certificates and more. Proceeds benefit The Couse Foundation and Couse-Sharp Historic Site.

*Hardhat tours*

*Friday (June 14), 5-7 p.m.*

*Couse-Sharp Historic Site, 146 Kit Carson Road*

*Open to gala attendees and invited guests only. RSVP required.*

Wine and hors d'oeuvres reception with "hardhat tours" of the site's future museum facility that includes the Lunder Research Center. Book signing events with scholars of the Taos Society of Artists. Opening of temporary exhibition "Joseph Henry Sharp's Montana" in the 1915 Sharp Studio.

*Open house*

*Sunday (June 16), 11 a.m. until 1 p.m.*

*Couse-Sharp Historic Site, 146 Kit Carson Road*

Special open house with book launch of "Eanger Irving Couse: The Life and Times of an American Artist, 1866-1936," the definitive biography of Couse by his granddaughter Virginia Couse Leavitt. The author will be signing copies, which will be available for sale. Visitors can also tour the temporary exhibition "Taos Pueblo Portraiture: The Photographic Studies of E. I. Couse" in the site's 1835 Luna Chapel and the permanent rotating exhibition "J. H. Sharp: The Life and Work of an American Legend," refreshed this season with artwork, ephemera and objects from his personal collection. Free admission, open to the public.

Proceeds from all events benefit The Couse Foundation and Couse-Sharp Historic Site.

