

Six men and 100 years

What did the Taos Society of Artists begin a century ago?

By Rick Romancito

Many will say the flood began with the "wagon wheel" incident. That's the oft-told tale of how Eastern artists Ernest Blumenschein and Bert Phillips happened upon Taos after a wheel broke on their wagon while on a painting trip to Mexico in 1898. They even took pictures. Others will point out that Blumenschein and Phillips wouldn't have known about Taos if it weren't for Joseph Henry Sharp who regaled them of tales describing this undiscovered country where Pueblo Indians and Hispanos lived in a lovely valley untouched by time — or exposure.

According to the Couse-Sharp Historic Site website, couse-sharp.org, the cultures and the spectacular light here caused Phillips to say to Blumenschein, "For heaven's sake, tell people what we have found! Send some artists out here. There is a lifetime's work for 20 men."

It wasn't long before these men began to tell others and soon Taos had become a place implanted as a vision of immaculate perception. Ultimately, the six who came first — Sharp, Blumenschein, Phillips and later Herbert Dunton, Oscar Berninghaus and E.I. Couse — decided there must be a way to collectively organize for mutual benefit, and thus the Taos Society of Artists was born.

One hundred years ago this week, specifically on July 15, 1915, they had their first meeting in one of the rooms rented by Oscar Berninghaus at the home of Dr. T. Paul Martin. That home is now The Taos Inn at 125 Paseo del Pueblo Norte.

This week, a variety of special events are planned to take note of this milestone in Taos (see schedule and sidebars below).

By the time the Society disbanded in 1927, it was made up of 12 active



Courtesy Couse-Sharp Historic Site

The Taos Society of Artists founders posing on Couse's front porch on Kit Carson Road.

members which included: Bert Phillips, Ernest Blumenschein, Irving Couse, Joseph H. Sharp, Oscar Berninghaus, Herbert Dunton, Julius Rolshoven, Walter Ufer, Victor Higgins, Martin Hennings, Kenneth Adams and Catherine Critcher.

During its existence, the Society managed to make Taos known to the world through entry in major exhibitions, traveling shows and railroad advertisements. In many ways, they were the first marketing experts. Their work was successful in that it accomplished lofty goals of furthering a style of romantic realism they felt best interpreted what they saw here, while establishing what they felt was a kind of Barbizon-like school of art by attracting other artists — and writers — to the region with similar intentions, according to Elizabeth Cunningham, co-author of "In Con-

temporary Rhythm: The Art of Ernest L. Blumenschein" (2008, University of Oklahoma Press).

In a sense, the area was ripe for the picking. But, what did they pick? From whom? And, to what end?

The Society certainly made an impact, one they may not have known during the members' lifetimes but it has borne out in the number of art galleries and artists who make their homes and livings here. Their success was also notable because at the time they were getting their work out into the world, the world was gradually taking note of a radical artistic vision centered on abstract expressionism. This avant-garde had already taken hold in 1880s France and was quickly becoming cutting edge at a time realism was being judged as unsophisticated.

It was an uphill fight to be sure. But

Culture Art Market

An exhibition hosted by the Taos Arts Council titled "The Culture Art Market: Pueblo and Hispanic Art in Taos" opens with a public reception today (July 9), 5-7 p.m., in the Historic Taos County Courthouse on northside of Taos Plaza. The show, according to TAC President Paul Figueroa, continues through July 19. Among the artists planning to exhibit are Bruce Gomez, Jonathan Warm Day Coming, Anita Rodriguez, Roger Martinez, Michael Vigil, Dan Vigil, Juanita Lavadie, Daniel Romero, Enrico Trujillo, Carlos Barela and Family, John Suazo, Jeralyn Lujan Lucero, Ramona Montaño. Ilona Spruce is assisting with additional Taos Pueblo artists.

to the people in their world, there was little of it to notice. Barbara Brenner, granddaughter of Oscar Berninghaus,

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100 Years and Beyond: Readings from Taos Literature

In celebration of the 100-year anniversary of the Taos Society of Artists, the Society of the Muse of the Southwest (SOMOS), is organizing a Read-A-Thon featuring locals reading from their favorite Taos writers, authors, and artists. The free event is planned next Thursday (July 16), from 10 a.m. until 1 p.m. in the Mural Room at the Historic Taos County Courthouse on the northside of Taos Plaza.

"The July 16 reading will be feast of words to honor the rich legacy linking the visual and literary arts in our community," SOMOS co-director David Pérez said in a prepared statement. "We're sure to hear excerpts from historical notables like Frank Waters, Mabel Dodge Luhan, John Nichols and D.H. Lawrence. But we'll also have people reading from all kinds of written material: Letters from (Ernest) Blumenschein and (Bert) Phillips, an article in *Horsefly* by John Suazo, a story by Ron Chávez, children's tales by Jonathan Warm Day Coming, and poems by Peter Rabbit, who (with Anne MacNaughton) started the famed Taos Poetry Circus, to name just a few. It's going to be a nice mix of our history."

Pérez said "the response has been great," and that, as of press time, the list of readers is still growing. Among the scheduled readers are Daniel Escalante, Bill Whaley, Elizabeth Cunningham, Maria Dolores González, Magdalene Smith, Phaedra Greenwood, Diana Rico, Sam Richardson, Steve Fox, Judith Rane, and many more.

Admission is free, but donations are welcome. For more information, call SOMOS at (575) 758-0081.



"Winter Funeral" by Victor Higgins, hanging in the Harwood Museum at the artist's request.

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says her family has been here since 1899. "This is where we are and this is where we are staying. Taos is the place to be," she said.

Brenner recalled that the Society members "were friends and close to all of us. They were all good citizens of Taos. I think they had a lot of fun. They had a lot of balls and dinner parties."

Her grandfather, in particular, was so good humored he was often called "the glue that held the Taos Society of Artists together" because of his diplomacy when thorny matters came up. "He was a really good guy," she said. Interestingly, she said her grandfather was the only Society member who was self-taught. He "took three semesters of night school. I guess he was just born with the ability."

It is said the members engaged with people in the community as models and as friends. Some, like Virginia Couse Leavitt, said one of her grandfather's models was like a father to her (See "10

Questions" on Page 10). Their influence, by way of Taos Pueblo's Antonio Luhan (Mabel Dodge Luhan's husband), helped alert the nation to the dangerous precedent represented by the Bursum Bill right about the time the Society was first gathering. The Bill would have affirmed the rights of squatters on tens of thousands of acres of tribal lands.

As time marched on, critics would look upon this relationship a bit differently, wondering whether the efforts of the Society was less promotion and more exploitation. It is a fact that art in Taos and New Mexico was being created by Native and Hispanic people long before the wagon wheel broke. The events this week will likely shed light on this debate, while also illustrating the depth of influence felt to this day in the art and artists of Taos. It was a lively time back then, and it's still a lively place to live. We urge you to take advantage of this occasion to listen to the variety of speakers, take in the art exhibitions on view, and to find a way to see the connections old and new.

Firehouse collection to be shown

"Celebrating the Centuries of Taos" is pleased to partner with Taos Volunteer Fire Department and open its public collection of art by Taos Society of Artists and many additional Taos artists for the enjoyment of visitors and residents. The open house is planned Tuesday (July 14), 1-4 p.m., at the Taos Volunteer Fire Department, 400 Camino de la Placita, Taos. Admission is free. For more information, call (575) 779-8579.

Learning about the artists

The Taos Art Museum at Fecchin House will celebrate the Taos Society of Artists on the very day of its 100th anniversary, Wednesday (July 15), from 5:30-6:30 p.m. with a special edition of Learning the Collections.

"We'll look at the various ways that the founders viewed and portrayed individual Puebloan and Indian cultures, in their endeavors to create uniquely American art," a press release states. "From idealism to ethnography, our survey will highlight the vision of the artists and the way they reflected broader American social views."

The Learning the Collections program gives participants "an opportunity to examine works of art as a whole: their materials, composition, and techniques and hear the artist's story."

Group size is limited to foster discussion, observation, and enjoyment. Call ahead to reserve a place: (575) 758-2690, ext. 101. Admission is \$10, but free for members. Taos Art Museum at Fecchin House is located at 227 Paseo del Pueblo Norte. Parking is free.

Schedule of events

Tuesday (July 14)

9 a.m. Historic Walk with Ginnie & Ernie Leavitt, granddaughter of E.I. Couse. Also, visit the Couse-Sharp Historic Site for the special exhibition, "Italy to Taos: Rolshoven and the Taos Society of Artists"

1-4 p.m. Open House, Firehouse Exhibit at Taos Fire Department, 323 Camino de la Placita. Since 1954 Taos artists have donated paintings to recognize the efforts of the Taos Volunteer Fire Department

Wednesday (July 15)

Mural Room all day at the Historic Taos County Courthouse, Taos Plaza northside

9 a.m. Historic Taos Plaza Walk

10 a.m. Official Welcome by Al Olson

10:30 a.m. Film screening: "It's Like Going Back in Time 100 Years" presented by Tom Azzari

11 a.m. Lecture: "What Buck Brought to the Table" on W.H. Dunton by historian Michael Grauer

12:30-2 p.m. Benefit Lunch at The Taos Inn, 125 Paseo del Pueblo Norte. Costs \$30 per person. Call to RSVP (575) 779-8579.

2 p.m. Flamenco dancers

2:15 p.m. Historic Courthouse and Fresco Lecture by David Henry and Rachel Preston Prinz

3 p.m. Taos County Historical Society Audio-tapes: Bert Phillips speaking about the murals he painted in Taos

3:15 p.m. Lecture "Ernest Blumenschein — a Painting History"

4 p.m. Film — "Up Close and Personal with Uncle Henry" presented by Tom Azzari

4:30 p.m. Memories of Oscar Berninghaus — Barbara Brenner, granddaughter of Berninghaus

5 p.m. Closing Comments, delivered by Carl Jones, President of The Couse Foundation

5:30 p.m. "Learning the Collections — Charles Stewart" (see sidebar)

Thursday (July 16)

10 a.m.-1 p.m. 100 Years and Beyond: Readings from Taos Literature (see sidebar)

2 p.m. Tour and picnic of Sierra Vista Cemetery. Many of Taos artists rest at Sierra Vista, find them and their story on a tour with Thom Wheeler. Bring your own meal and refreshments. Sunday (July 19)

Noon Fiestas de Santiago y Santa Ana Parade, featuring a reconstruction of the Taos Society of Artists 1939 float with the "Broken Wheel."