

Window to the past

Virginia Couse Leavitt puts the Taos Society of Artists' legacy into context

By Rick Romancito

There was a time when Taos was nothing but dusty dirt roads and low adobe buildings. There were no art galleries. Wagons and horses were the main transportation. Taos Indian men wore blankets and their long hair in braids. The seasons were one long string of changing colors splashed across the rolling landscape of mountains and mesa.

You can see how a place like this would spur the imagination, as it did when Eastern-bred artists found their way here in the early 20th century.

Personal connections to this time and place are cherished, as any Taosño will tell you. For Virginia Couse Leavitt, that connection is palpable each time she steps into the Couse-Sharp Historic Site at 146 Kit Carson Road.

This is where she grew up with Eanger Irving Couse as her grandfather. Couse was one of the founding members and first president of the Taos Society of Artists, which centennial we are celebrating this coming Wednesday (July 15). Who better to give us a perspective on this important milestone in Taos art history than someone with a direct link to the people involved? Here's what's on her mind ...

1. Can you describe what Taos was like when you were a child?

Virginia Couse Leavitt: People now view the paintings of the Taos Society as romanticized, but my memories from the late 1930s and early '40s are exactly like those paintings. The Pueblo men wore white sheets or colorful blankets, and tied their hair in "chungas." Most of the streets were unpaved and horses and wagons were a common sight in the Plaza. My grandfather's favorite model, Ben Lujan, was like a father to me.

2. What was it like for you to grow up in a



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Virginia Couse Leavitt, on stage at the Taos Community Auditorium for a June 5 roundtable discussion of the Taos Society of Artists.

Behind her is a portrait of her grandfather, E.I. Couse.

family with such historic associations?

Leavitt: In my family we were always conscious of the art and history of Taos, but I was not fully aware of its real importance until after I studied art history in college. I grew up surrounded by my grandfather's paintings and was also well aware of the other artists in town, but as a child, this was just

natural to me — the way life was.

3. Who among the Taos Society of Artists would you consider most colorful and why?

Leavitt: Each of the artists had a distinctive personality. Blumenschein was very competitive, but his tactless opinions sometimes caused trouble; Ufer pinned a note on his studio door that read "Dynamite within" to

dissuade visitors from interrupting his work, yet he was a Socialist who worked hard on the behalf of others, including the TSA; Couse and Berninghaus were both even-tempered and instrumental in the success of the Taos Society; Phillips, as the first year-round resident, was busily involved in town politics; Dunton was the most colorful in his appearance because he dressed as a cowboy.

4. The Society left an unquestionable artistic legacy in Taos, but is there something most people might overlook?

Leavitt: The TSA's significance in the broader history of American art is not commonly recognized. In the early 20th century, Americans were searching for "real American art," as opposed to pictures that were indistinguishable from those painted in Europe. The Taos Society believed they had found this in the Western landscape and the indigenous people. Their circuit exhibitions introduced this imagery as well as the brilliant light and colors of the Southwest to art lovers across the country. It was like a breath of fresh air.

5. There is some debate about whether the artists helped preserve the ways of life of Native and Hispanic people or exploited them. What is your opinion on this subject?

Leavitt: I know how much my grandfather and the other artists admired the Native peoples. There is no question but that the early "Anglo" artists admired the long and important artistic traditions of both Indians and Hispanics: they collected examples of their material culture, showcased it in their paintings, and promoted its preservation. When problems with the government arose, they were always advocates for the Native Americans.

6. In your recollections, did you ever hear E.I. Couse and Bert Phillips talk about the famous "wagon wheel" incident? What did they say?

Leavitt: I was too young when my grandfather died and do not remem-



The studio of artist Eanger Irving Couse at the Couse-Sharp Historic Site on Kit Carson Road in Taos.

ber hearing Phillips talk about this either. However, in 1991, a group of art historians found the exact spot where the wheel broke (in 1898). After three attempts, using photos made by Phillips in 1898, we located the old road bed and the big rock on which Blumy and Phillips had laid out their gear.

7. Do you think the Society's influence is still felt in Taos today? How?

Leavitt: Since the time of the broken wheel, how many aspiring artists have ended up in Taos with car trouble and have decided to stay? It is a magical place for the creative soul. I do not believe that Taos would have developed into the art colony it is today, however, if it had not been for the fame it achieved under the TSA. It still retains its reputation and attracts art connoisseurs from all over the world.

8. The Society only lasted for 12 years. Why do you think it dissolved?

Leavitt: It dissolved basically for three reasons: First, there was no longer anyone willing to devote the time necessary to organize the exhibitions; secondly, it had served its purpose and the members needed to concentrate on their individual careers; thirdly, an interest in modernism had turned the public in a new direction.

9. Tell us a little about the traveling exhibits the Society organized.

Leavitt: Immediately after the TSA was formed in 1915, the museum in Santa Fe asked if the group would be interested in exhibiting their work. It was extreme-

ly successful and they were asked for a second exhibit in 1916. Requests from various venues began pouring in, so in 1917 they decided to create a national circuit exhibition. These were launched in New York and traveled from there to various venues around the country. This continued until 1927 when the Society was disbanded.

10. Can you tell us about the Couse Foundation and what it does?

Leavitt: The Couse Foundation was formed in 2001 to preserve the Couse-Sharp Historic Site, which includes the intact home and studio of E.I. Couse, his son's mechanical workshop, Mrs. Couse's garden, and the neighboring property of J.H. Sharp, including his two studio buildings. The structures on site have a long history, dating from 1830 to 1930. The main purpose of the Foundation is educational, including guided tours, lectures, exhibitions, and research opportunities.

Virginia Couse Leavitt is the granddaughter of E.I. Couse, one of the founders of the Taos Art Colony and first President of the Taos Society of Artists. She and her husband, Ernest, live in Tucson, Ariz., but since 1991 have spent six months of the year in Taos helping to preserve the Couse house. Virginia has a master's degree in art history from the University of Arizona and has written and lectured on the Taos Society of Artists. She is the authority on Couse and has written his biography, slated to be published by the University of Oklahoma Press.



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