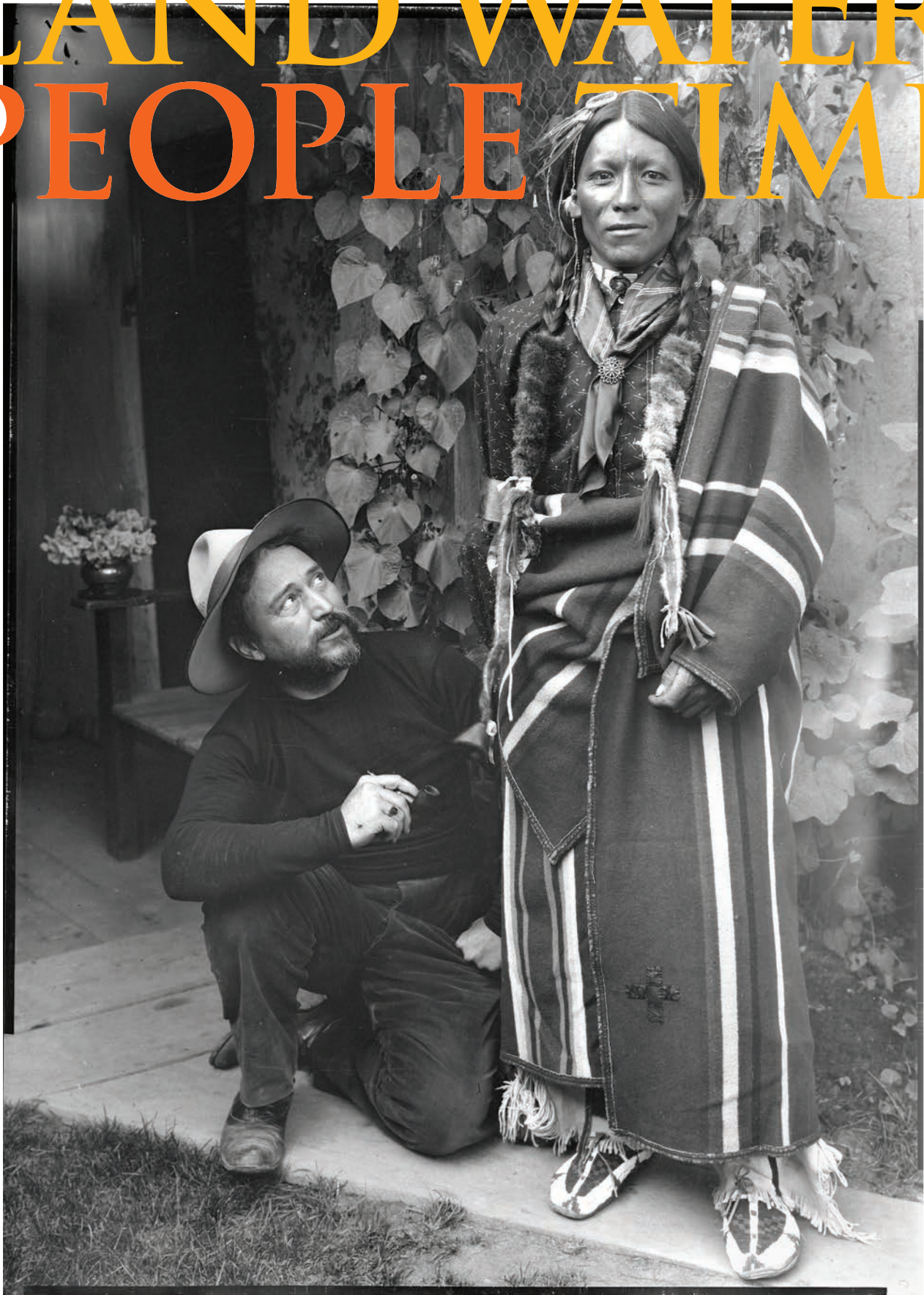


LAND WATER PEOPLE TIME





ENVIRONMENTAL

TAOS



FROM
BLACK
AND
WHITE
TO
COLORFUL
CAPTURES

PHOTOGRAPHS USED AS VISUAL REFERENCES BY E.I. COUSE YIELD A SURPRISING SLICE OF TAOS LIFE | BY RICK ROMANCITO

EVEN TODAY,

some fine art instructors view the use of photography as a visual reference for paintings to be a mark of laziness. That impression has been around for a long time, especially when it comes to art used for advertising illustration where speed and accuracy counts when trying to please a client. This axiom has become even more entrenched as mountains of content have become available on the web. But, as in anything art-related, there are always exceptions to the rule, and, with apologies to esteemed professors, not everything an instructor says is necessarily binding.

Take Eanger Irving Couse, for instance. Couse, born in Saginaw, Mich. in 1866, was one of the founding members of the Taos Society of Artists (1915-1927), a group of professional painters who settled here and wanted to promote and sell their artwork. His friend and eventual neighbor, Joseph Henry Sharp, along with fellow artist Ernest Blumenschein, had encountered Taos after a wagon wheel broke while on a painting trip to Mexico in 1898. As the wheel was repaired, they wandered through town and immediately recognized its creative possibilities. Later, in Paris, Blumenschein met with Couse and spoke glowingly of this small, picturesque community of Hispanos and Native Pueblo Indians.

In 1909, Couse traveled to Taos to see for himself and built a studio on what is now Kit Carson Road. There, he set about building a phenomenal body of work, numbering more than 1,500 oil paintings of western subjects inspired by what he saw and imagined in Taos. In so doing, he also benefited from the deep friendships he cultivated with his models and their families.



Previous page: JERRY MIRABAL poses near a waterfall for one of E. I. Couse's photo studies. Undated. | Above: A YOUNG GIRL looks at the camera as people gather at Taos Pueblo. Circa 1903. COURTESY LUNDER RESEARCH CENTER

FROM SHUTTER TO PAINTBRUSH

Fast forward to 2018 when the Lunder Foundation of Portland, Maine announced that it was providing a \$600,000 grant to create an archive and research center focused on the Taos Society of Artists. Its location was the former Mission Gallery building at 138 Kit Carson Road, adjacent to what is now the Couse-Sharp Historic Site.

Before its quiet opening in 2022, Director Davison Koenig not only has supervised the immense job of creating a state-of-the-art museum, research library, learning center, archive and exhibit space, he is also overseeing the careful cataloging of a kind of hidden treasure within the Couse Foundation's walls.

Couse was a prolific painter, to be sure, but he was also a talented photographer and, after his death in 1939, he left behind a massive collection of negatives. These photos were not only used by the artist as reference images for his paintings, but they also created a visual record of his everyday life, including candid and rare images of early Taos and Taos Pueblo.

"He was such a prolific photographer," Koenig told the Taos News. "And, a lot of the photos you see are of (Taos Pueblo tribal member) Ben Lujan, because that was one of his main models. This is in 1907, when they were both still pretty young."

Lunder Research Center Director and Virginia Couse Leavitt Archivist Chair Marissa Hendriks said the negatives are undergoing a rigorous high resolution scanning and documentation process. "The new digital positives we are creating from the cellulose nitrate negatives provide us with an astonishingly high quality image compared to Couse's original contact prints. The digital technology that was unavailable in Couse's day generates extremely clear and detailed photographs that look like they were captured in 2022 rather than 100 years ago."



PHOTOS BY NATHAN BURTON/TAOS NEWS



ANTONITA
LUJAN
(wife of Ben
Lujan) poses
with child in
the studio
of E. I.
Couse. 1910.

COURTESY
LUNDER
RESEARCH
CENTER



●

BEN LUJAN
at the
residence
and studio
of E. I.
Couse. 1916.

COURTESY
LUNDER
RESEARCH
CENTER







●
A shot being set up for one of Couse's photo studies. BEN LUJAN faces away from the camera and VIRGINIA COUSE stands behind a tree steadying a horse. 1907.

COURTESY
LUNDER
RESEARCH
CENTER

IN 2020,

she said the Lunder received a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to digitize all of Couse's contact prints. "We've got over 16,000 facsimiles up there as of early June 2022 and that number will continue to grow. We scanned the entire collection for preservation purposes and reached out to relevant tribal community representatives to review the content for cultural sensitivity before publishing them online. Any materials that were flagged as sensitive have been restricted and require written permission sent directly to us from the community whose culture is represented before access will be provided."

Among those contacted was Ilona Spruce, Taos Pueblo tourism director, who examined them for imagery that local tribal elders might consider sensitive in relation to their Native religion and customs. To this day, Taos Pueblo maintains strict control over any access to its language and spiritual activities. At the time, Couse knew nothing of how these images might be judged in the future. He was just making photos of things he saw and the people he knew. "So, Ilona was essential in helping to review all of the photographs," Hendriks said. "We also talked to tribal archivists at Hopi (in Arizona). We do have a number of photos that are not accessible to the public without written permission."

In addition, Lunder archivist David Mapes, whose task it is to scan each negative, said, "We have some amazing photos of Taos Plaza. I know, if you go to the (University of New Mexico) digital archive in Taos Plaza's tag, there's not a lot of photos, like the one that comes up a lot from like the 1940s or 50s. But, you know, this is from 1912. And you know, you're going to see all these great buildings that are just gone today."

RARE IMAGES

In the 1940s and 50s, Taos underwent a tourism boom, which meant many visitors from all over the world came to Taos to see the Pueblo and walk through the meandering dirt roads of Taos. From that time, many took snapshots that show that period. But, photos from before then are rare, especially since a good portion of Taos Plaza, including the county courthouse, was destroyed in a 1932 fire. Then in 1933, the Don Fernando Hotel also burned in a fire. In 1933, Taos was incorporated and, soon after, a number of renovations to the plaza area were undertaken. When examined, the Lunder staff knew they had an invaluable record of the past.

Equally as important has been the staff's effort to identify Taos Pueblo people in the photos. It is an unfortunate fact that many artists who traveled throughout the Southwest during the early 20th Century tended to view Native people they painted as archetypes rather than individuals. Many of these people who live on in historic paintings have become nameless.

"The Taos Society of Artists came to town not only for the light, landscape and culture, but many of them wanted to record this before it changed drastically," Koenig said. "And so they could easily see how things were changing already in the rest of the world ... Paradoxically, they enabled a lot of that change themselves by bringing attention to this area."

Koenig said it was remarkable to see images of the area looking so different from the way it is now. "And it's just empty. Nothing between here and Ranchos (de Taos) ... One hundred years later, everyone's talking about development in real estate and apartments and



COURTESY LUNDER RESEARCH CENTER

A shrouded figure can be seen walking towards San Francisco de Asís Church in Ranchos de Taos. Circa 1903.

[back then] they're having the same conversation ... about what's happening to our town. Can we control it? Is it out of our control? How do we preserve it? You know the cultural integrity of this town that keeps it unique that we live here for ... Because, you know, people come here and they think they are all enlightened and have this brand new idea. And it's like these issues have been around forever.

AN ARTISTIC DEEP DIVE

Back to Couse and his approach to depicting the humanity of his subjects, it is clear he was looking for a way to illuminate the viewer in ways that were more personal than the common ethnographic depictions.

"With Indian subjects, the artist and public alike sometimes found it difficult to distinguish between art and ethnology," Virginia Couse Leavitt, the artist's granddaughter, writes in the book, "Eanger Irving Couse: The Life and Times of an American Artist 1866-1936" (2019, University of Oklahoma Press). "In their desire to record what was perceived as a vanishing race, Couse and other artists attempted to capture something in the spirit of the American Indian through mood and color, myth and artifact. But the public was often overwhelmed by the pictorial aspects of the exotic subject matter, seeing and expecting ethnographic

accuracy and overlooking the subtler implications of interpretation."

Much of this was accomplished by the deep connections he forged with the people he worked with as models. These were not simply people he hired to come into his studio to sit for his photographic, drawing or painting studies. These were people who came to see him as family, and vice versa.

Koenig said he was struck by the recent memory of a woman who visited the site "and she said, 'well, I've been researching my great grandmother for years now. And I have all this wonderful information about her and the family. And I'd love to talk to you sometimes.' Fantastic. Our goal is to share these stories, to provide a more nuanced understanding of Taos and the American West."

Putting names to images, creating a record that forges a bond that is no longer a one-way mirror, that's one of the most interesting functions of the Lunder.

"Couse's own use of the camera in preparing studies for his paintings undoubtedly reinforced and perpetuated these elements in his style," Leavitt writes. Now, students of the life and times of artists like Couse have a valuable and lively resource.

The Couse-Sharp Historic Site, located at 145 Kit Carson Road, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the New Mexico Register of Cultural Properties. Visit couse-sharp.org. **LWPT**