

Capturing a vanished era

New biography of Taos artist E. Irving Couse adds to storied history



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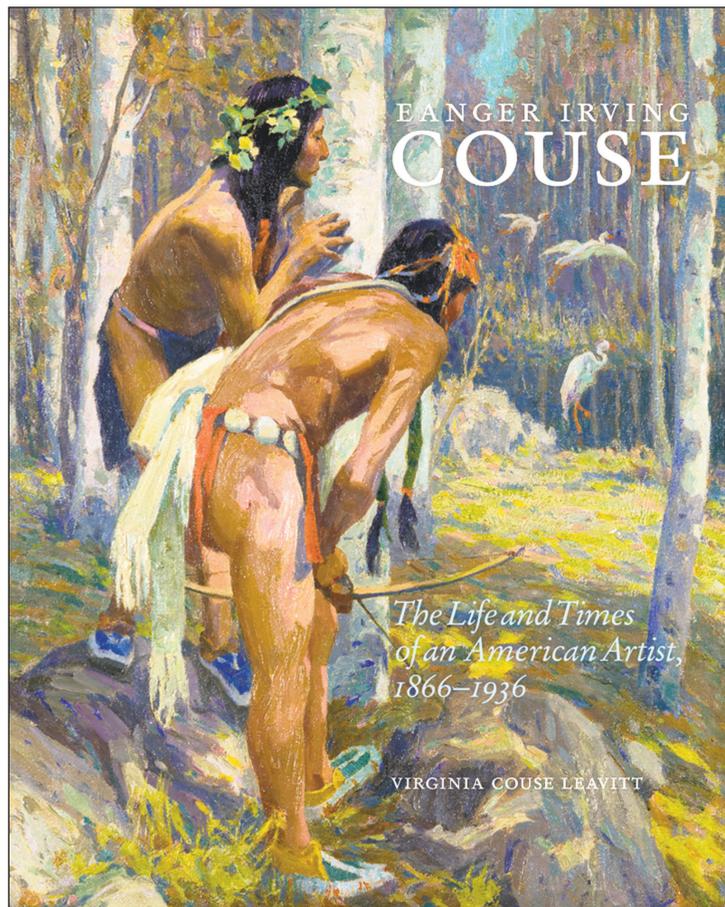
By Johanna DeBiase

EANGER IRVING COUSE: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF AN AMERICAN ARTIST, 1866-1936

By Virginia Couse Leavitt
388 pp. University of
Oklahoma Press.
Retail \$59.95

There's no better person to write a book about Eanger Irving Couse than his own granddaughter, Virginia Couse Leavitt. In 1979, soon after receiving her master's degree in art history, Leavitt's father passed away and she discovered a large body of archival material in their family home in Taos. Years later, as she began work on Couse's biography, Leavitt unearthed a box that had been given to her decades before when she was too young to care to open it.

She learned that it contained 276 letters that had been written by her grandmother between 1882 and 1912. The letters detailed her grandparents' life during those years in Paris, New York City and Taos. This collection



of ephemera, as well as many trips to libraries, art colonies, museums, historical societies, galleries and across the globe to follow in the footsteps of her grandparents, served as the material and inspiration for the recently published book "Eanger Irving Couse: The Life and Times of an American Artist, 1866-1936."

In her narrative, Couse is born in Saginaw, Michigan in 1866 during the time of a booming lumber industry, which dispossesses the Chippewa Nation of their vast acreage of pine forests. "Couse had been fascinated by Indians since boyhood,"

Leavitt writes. "His father owned farmland not far from a Chippewa village, which gave him the added opportunity to observe the Indians and to learn that they were in fact friendly." This early fascination with Native Americans possesses Couse for the rest of his life and inspires the artwork that will make him famous.

Couse knows early on in life that he wants to be an artist and travels to Chicago to further his art instruction where he is greatly inspired by contemporary artists. Returning to Saginaw, he finds the funds needed to move to Paris, the undisputed art capital of the world in 1886. Studying at



RICK ROMANCITO/THE TAOS NEWS

VIRGINIA COUSE LEAVITT, photographed beneath a portrait of her grandfather E.I. Couse, at a 2015 roundtable discussion consisting of descendants of the Taos Society of Artists. The event took place at the Taos Community Auditorium.

Académie Julian, Couse does well for himself, winning art prizes.

"The fall of 1887 was a turning point in Couse's personal life. On a rainy day in early October, Virginia Walker, an American art student from the state of Washington, arrived at a small hotel on rue de Longchamp." The following year, Couse's painting "Fleur de Prison" is accepted into the highly

coveted Paris Salon. Two years later, Couse is featured in the well-regarded Paris International Exposition. Walker and Couse are married soon after.

Upon returning to the States in 1891, Couse sets out to find Native models to paint. In Washington, many of the tribes he meets are superstitious about having their likeness rendered on paper, but eventually Couse befriends an elderly

Klickitat woman and man to pose for him.

Leavitt writes that Couse did not portray Indians as cruel heathens, such as his contemporaries did. "In this, Couse's first major painting containing an Indian figure ["The Captive," 1891], he began to define the characteristics of the later Indian paintings for which he is best known. By posing his model in a contemplative attitude and carefully defining the cultural artifacts, he invites the observer to view life from the Indian's perspective."

During an era when the United States is actively engaged in Indian extermination and assimilation policies, forcing Native children into boarding schools where they were

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– VIRGINIA COUSE LEAVITT FROM HER BOOK 'DANGER IRVING COUSE: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF AN AMERICAN ARTIST, 1866-1936.'

punished for speaking their native language, Couse is countering the commonly held beliefs that Indians are less-than-human savages by showing them in a humane light.

Feeling isolated from the art world in Washington, the Coueses move to Europe and then, homesick, to New York. In search of a location to summer where he can find Indian subjects to paint, now considered his specialty, Couse discovers Taos, thanks to his friend Ernest Blumenshein. The Coueses arrive in Taos in 1902.

Couse counts among his models from the Taos Pueblo Jerry Mirabal and Ben Lujan. Couse continues to travel throughout the Southwest in search of new material and inspiration.

In 1906, the Coueses purchased



COURTESY COUSE FOUNDATION

E.I. COUSE is flanked by two of his models from Taos Pueblo.

a house in Taos, and with fellow artists, established Taos as an art colony, putting this little-known town on the map. "For several years the news media had been spreading the word that an interesting group of artists was working in Taos, painting the extraordinary scenery of New Mexico and the picturesque Native people of the area. Individual examples of the work of these artists appeared in exhibits across the country and stimulated the desire among art lovers and collectors to see more."

In the summer of 1915, the Taos art colony is in full swing and as such, sets the stage for the founding of the Taos Society of Artists, including Couse, Blumenshein, Joseph Henry Sharp, Oscar E. Berninghaus, W. Herbert Dunton and Bert Phillips. Couse's popularity and prestige continue to soar.

According to the book jacket, this is the first scholarly exploration of Couse's life and artistic achievements. Throughout the book, full-color reproductions of Couse's paintings and drawings are included side by side with his life story, assisting to chronologize his life and work. He was a masterly artist, and the reader will quickly become engaged with Couse's progressive skill, already fascinating from the start.

Measuring 11 by 9 inches, this is not the kind of book you can easily curl up with in your favorite reading chair. Beautifully printed on archival paper, the work has the stature of a coffee-table book, but the content of a biography. Best read at the kitchen table with a pot of tea.

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