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FINE ART

By native hands

Couse-Sharp Historic Site exhibits 'Full Circle: Taos Pueblo Contemporary'

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San Geronimo Church at Taos Pueblo, photograph by Debbie Lujan

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The Taos Society of Artists put this dusty little town on the map in the early part of the 20th century by conveying to the world the look, feel and texture of our people through works of art that have become timeless.

In many respects, their "discovery" of Taos at that particular moment was fortuitous. It was a fleeting era that came and went as quickly as the aspen leaves in fall. It was also significant because it brought together not only the artists and their subjects, a relationship that has been relatively sterile in other places and times, but it sparked a relationship here that found the subjects as interested in how these creations were made as it was in being the inspiration for them.

Noting how this relationship has evolved, the Couse Foundation of Taos is launching a new exhibition that focuses on contemporary works by Taos Pueblo tribal members.

The Couse Foundation will sponsor four events Saturday (July 7).

At the Couse-Sharp Historic Site at 146 Kit Carson Road, there will be a First Saturday open house from 3-5 p.m. This will include a concurrent opening of the exhibition "Full Circle: Taos Pueblo Contemporary," which includes an artist demonstration and talk in the site's Luna Family Chapel. Plus, that morning, foundation founder Virginia Couse Leavitt will give a lecture titled "In My Grandfather's Footsteps" at the Harwood Museum of Art, 238 Ledoux Street.

"Full Circle" will be on view through Nov. 3.

The lecture planned by Leavitt, granddaughter of early Taos painter E. Irving Couse, is based on research trips she and her husband made to Europe in the 1980s. Using sketchbooks, photographs and letters from the Couse Family Archive, the Leavitts relived Couse's summer vacations spent in French art colonies during his student years in Paris. Leavitt is an art historian who is the authority on her grandfather's work. Tickets are \$10, \$8 for Harwood Museum of Art members.

At 3:30 p.m., glass artist Ira Lujan will present a talk and glass blowing demonstration near the Luna Family Chapel.

Lujan is one of more than 15 Taos Pueblo artists who are featured in the exhibit. "The artists of the Taos Society of Artists were inspired by the art and culture of Taos Pueblo," Davison Koenig, Couse-Sharp Historic Site executive director and curator, said in a prepared statement. The charter of the TSA states that one of the purposes for which it was formed was "to promote and stimulate the practical expressions of art -- to preserve and promote the native art."

Koenig said many of the TSA artists developed lifelong friendships and even familial bonds with their Native models, who included Looking Elk, Hunting Son, Star Road, Elk Duststorm, Rain Coming Down and Elkfoot, to name a few. "TSA artists became strong advocates for Native rights and sovereignty," he adds. "The exhibition 'Full Circle' honors those relationships and the many artists from Taos Pueblo who continue to redefine Native art and identity."

Besides Ira Lujan, other exhibiting artists include Joseph Concha, Causandra and Michael Dukepoo, Sean Flanagan Rising Sun, Debbie Lujan, Jocelyn Martinez, Patricia Michaels, Edna Romero, Ken Romero, Maria Samora, Yellowbird Samora, Dawning Pollen Shorty, Sonny Spruce, John Suazo, Ryan Suazo, Jonathan Warm Day Coming and Angie Yazzie.

However, it would be remiss not to mention the issues that have arisen in contemporary times regarding the idea that the Native models used by the artists were in some ways exploited. Koenig says that criticism "is valid," in light of modern views regarding the ways the images inspired by them were then exhibited in prestigious venues and sold for respectable sums of money.

But, what some may not know is the deeper exchanges the relationships helped create. Some of the models went on to learn how to create their own artwork and aided in the artist's creative processes.

It must be noted, too, that this was happening at a time when the United States was actively engaged in extermination and assimilation policies that would make current issues over separation of families seem light in comparison. In remarks last week for a talk Koenig gave at the Taos Art Museum, he said, "Remember that during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the scientific and legislative communities were still debating whether these 'savages' were entirely human and capable of redemption. The BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) slogan of the day was 'kill the Indian, save the man.' Communities were forcibly removed from their ancestral homes to eke out an existence in an often inhospitable and foreign land. Children were taken from their families and placed in boarding schools thousands of miles from home. They were made to cut their hair, punished for speaking their native tongue, and denied their beliefs. Many never returned home."

Taos, at that time, was in a kind of idealistic bubble. It was a place where time stood still for a brief moment and held breathless long enough for these artists to capture what they saw with almost a documentarian's eye as opposed to the Remingtons of the day who romanticized the bloody conflicts between cowboys and Indians.

Koenig went on to state, "The (Taos Society of Artists), on the other hand, were depicting the integrity of Native people, the inner quietude, activities of daily life, domestic tranquility, agrarian work and ceremonial obligations. As their interactions with their Native models deepened, so too their understanding of the inequity of federal Indian policy. The artists through their artwork, letters and lobbying became advocates for Native rights and sovereignty."

Today, artists at Taos Pueblo demand the level of respect their non-Indian counterparts take for granted. They are right to, especially with regard to the level of success and accomplishment. Take Native fashion designer Pat Michaels, who was singled out for her talent on the nationally broadcast TV show "Project Runway."

"Gazing as a child at the paintings of the Taos Society of Artists expanded my world view and inspired a higher range of appreciation for art and my native heritage," she said. "As long as The Couse-Sharp Historic Site and the masterpieces of the Taos Society of Arts survive, Taos Pueblo will continue to draw from these natural spring waters of my Native pride."

It's been a struggle, especially to be taken seriously outside the "Indian Art" milieu. "I feel that these fine artists had the same fate where their contemporary artisans weren't ready to except Native subject matter as something that would hold any value," she said. "The Taos Art Society took a chance with the Natives of Taos Pueblo as their subject matter. I can't imagine this was so easy for them in the art world during the early 1900s to the 1950s. It was the unlikely subject matter that saved my life. They gave me a platform outside of my village to help validate who I was and where I come from as a beautiful person."

Take time to see these works and imagine the long journeys the artists, Native and non-Native, took to come to this place.

All exhibited work will be for sale. Each of the site's First Saturday events through October will host a demonstration by one of the artists.

During the open house from 3-5 p.m., visitors can tour the studios of E. I. Couse and J. H. Sharp, two of the founders of the TSA, and enjoy a stroll through Virginia Walker Couse's historic garden. Docents will be present in every room providing in-depth knowledge of the Couse home and studio, the Kibbey Couse laboratory and machine shop, and the exhibition "J. H. Sharp: The Life and Work of an American Legend" in the recently restored 1915 Sharp Studio.

Events

- "In My Grandfather's Footsteps" lecture by Virginia Couse Leavitt will be Saturday (July 7), 10 a.m., in the Arthur Bell Auditorium at the Harwood Museum of Art, 238 Ledoux Street. Tickets are \$10, \$8 for Harwood Museum of Art members. Seating is limited, doors open at 9:30 a.m. Call (575) 758-9826.
- All First Saturday events at the Couse-Sharp Historic Site are free to the public; donations welcome
- Entrance to the site is at 146 Kit Carson Road. Please park in the free municipal lot about a half block east of the site on Kit Carson Road
- Because of the site's nature as a place of historic preservation, the CSHS buildings and grounds are not ADA accessible

Couse-Sharp Historic Site

In 1915, six American-born, European-trained artists founded the Taos Society of Artists with the mission to promote the authentically American, Native art and culture of the Southwest. The group grew to include 12 active members and several more associate and honorary members.

The Couse-Sharp Historic Site reflects the original goals of these artists and continues to promote their mission. The site includes the home and studio of E. I. Couse, the garden designed by his wife, Virginia, the workshops of his son, Kibbey, and the two studios of his neighbor and fellow artist, J. H. Sharp. Couse's studio and darkroom are maintained in a state very close to how he left them upon his death in 1936.

The Site also brings to light the contributions of the models from Taos Pueblo and other indigenous groups who sat for their paintings as well as the Native artists whose work was collected and used by both artists.

Sharp's later studio, built in 1915, was completely restored in early 2017 and now contains a permanent rotating exhibition of his artwork, personal effects and Native art he collected and used in his paintings. His earlier studio, converted from an 1835 chapel, hosts changing exhibitions of artwork and contextual material related to the TSA.

The Couse Foundation has announced a project to purchase a building adjacent to the site and renovate it extensively as The Lunder Research Center. It will contain archives and collections related to the entire TSA, exhibition and curatorial spaces, and will preserve the last remnants of the home of J. H. Sharp.

All public areas of the site can be toured by appointment, which can be made on the *couse-sharp.org* website or by calling the site office at (575) 751-0369.

The mission of The Couse Foundation is to preserve and interpret the Couse-Sharp Historic Site, its buildings, grounds, collections and the archives of the Taos Society of Artists, through education, collaboration and scholarly engagement. The organization's vision is even more expansive: to be the center for scholarship of E. I. Couse, J. H. Sharp and the Taos Society of Artists.

