All in the Family: Taos’s Couse Foundation

BY BETSY THOMAS

In the tiny town of Taos, nestled high in the mountains of northern New Mexico, sits an enchanting property. Though street views of it are unassuming, just beyond the simple walls and entrance lies an artistic treasure — the studio home of the painter Eanger Irving Couse (1866-1936). Celebrated for his stoic, introspective portrayals of local Native Americans, Couse was a trailblazer in forming one of America’s earliest art colonies; indeed, he became the first president of the Taos Society of Artists when it was officially established in 1915. A photograph of its members shows Couse on his porch with Joseph Henry Sharp, Ernest L. Blumenschein, W. Herbert Dunton, Bert G. Phillips, and Oscar E. Berninghaus. Over the next 12 years, the Society’s traveling exhibitions introduced the country to a uniquely American art form hailed by collectors and critics alike.1

Purchased in 1909 by Couse and his wife, Virginia, as a permanent residence, the old adobe house on Kit Carson Road required only a few alterations — most importantly the enlargement of a south wing that would become Couse’s studio. Until recently, the house was run privately by the artist’s grand-daughter, the art historian Virginia Couse Leavitt, and her husband, Ernest Leavitt. Through their dedicated efforts, the site has been added to the National Register of Historic Places and designated a National Trust Historic Artist’s Home and Studio. Concerned about the property’s future, the Leavitts partnered with a few key supporters to form the Couse Foundation in 2001. While their main motivation was to preserve the structure and every object, document, and painting inside it, they also recognized the site’s huge potential to educate the public by offering an authentic glimpse inside the early Taos art community.

Set against a mountain backdrop of dramatic vistas and an ever-changing kaleidoscope of light, this property is unique in several respects. First, while most historic homes in Taos have been demolished or modified, the Couse property has survived intact — from its architectural footprint to the design of the surrounding landscape. Because it has descended within the same family, its furnishings, artworks, archival materials, and other contents appear exactly as Couse left them upon his death in 1936. Second, the site is uniquely tied to another Taos Society member, Joseph Henry Sharp, who lived in the adjacent home. Before he died in 1953 without heirs, Sharp sold his property to Couse’s son, Kibby; this transaction included his two studios, one of which had previously been the Luna Chapel. Thus the combined properties are now called the Couse-Sharp Historic Site.

To pass through the simple doorway of the Couse House is to step back in time. From the garden, a covered porch leads to various rooms. Entering the living room, with its large hearth, visitors are greeted by a masterpiece of Couse’s early period, All Saints’ Day at Enoq, painted in 1895 in France, where he spent six years pursuing the rigorous curriculum at the Académie Julian under William Bouguereau. Couse’s formative years there served him well, as he was invited to show at the prestigious Paris Salon.2

Although his later Western scenes’ explorations of light, color, and subject matter marked a sharp departure from his early style, Couse fully retained his academic ideals and lifelong commitment to figurative painting. Upon returning to the U.S. in 1896, he made it his mission to paint the American Indian. This fascination originated with the
E.I. Couse (1866-1936)

*Decorating the War Shield*
1902, Oil on canvas, 24 x 29 in.
On offer at the Coeur d'Alene Art Auction on July 26
(cdaartauction.com)
Estimated to fetch $250,000-350,000

E.I. Couse (1866-1936)

*All Saints' Day at Enocq*
1895, Oil on canvas, 50 x 60 in.
Couse Foundation
Photo: Laurence K. Gustafson

E.I. Couse (1866-1936)

*The Water Bottle*
1929, Oil on canvas on board, 20 x 24 in.
Private collection, courtesy Zaplin-Lampert Gallery, Santa Fe
The exterior and restored
garden of the E.I. Couse Home
Photo: Ernest E. Leavitt

The interior of
Couse's studio today
Photo: Lawrence K.
Gustafson

tribes he encountered while living on his wife's family ranch in the
state of Washington. Virginia Leavitt writes that Couse's "decision
to paint Native Americans reflected his conviction that they were the
only uniquely American subject matter available to this country's figure
painters."

Couse's spacious studio emanates an atmosphere of quiet
concentration. Arrayed along a high shelf running its full perimeter is
his impressive collection of Pueblo pots, which featured prominently in
his paintings alongside other props still displayed here. Here, too, is the
wooden platform on which models posed while he sat at his easel nearby.
Couse forged crucial friendships with Indians from the neighboring
pueblo, particularly Jerry Mirabal and Ben Lujan (who became his
favorite model and appeared in countless oils such as The Water Bottle).
In his later years, the Indians nicknamed Couse "Green Mountain" on
account of his hefty size and familiar green sweater.

Today Ginnie Couse Leavitt faithfully sustains her family's mission
caring for the property, the chief challenge being to stabilize and
modernize the infrastructure without disturbing the original patina.
It is no small job to preserve and document her grandfather's vast
holdings of letters, photographs, and artifacts, even while pursuing
her ongoing catalogue raisonné project. In 1980, the Leavitts quite
accidentally discovered in a darkened corner a previously unknown
cache of well preserved nitrate negatives taken by Couse; this brought
his photographic archive count up to approximately 10,000 items. For
scholars, it remains an almost incredible find that deepens our collective
understanding of how Couse used photographs as source material for
his paintings. Amazingly, most of the negatives' boxes were labeled and
numbered, and some prints bear pencil marks proving that they had
been gridded for transfer to canvas.

The Couse Foundation's leaders are working hard to engage a wider
audience and deepen public understanding of the Southwest's cultural
history. Ever loyal to Taos, priority is given to lectures, workshops, and
other outreach programs that directly serve the local community, but a
more ambitious and exciting long-term goal is to provide facilities for
students and scholars to inspect and use the Foundation's holdings. The
Foundation welcomes donations, which are tax-deductible, and also
visits to the property between May and October. Anyone planning a visit
to Taos is invited to call ahead and make an appointment for a tour. Rest
assured, you will be glad you did.

Information: 146 Kit Carson Road, Taos, NM 87571, 575.751.0369, cousefoundation.org

BETSY THOMAS is a former 19th-century paintings specialist at Christie's who
now runs her own art advisory firm in New York City.

Endnotes
2. Fleur de Prison (1888) was admitted to that year's Salon.
3. These tribes were Klikitat, Yakima, Cayuse, and Umatilla.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.