



# TAOS NEWS

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GALLERY GUIDE

## Five Museums



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**Davison Koenig, the Couse-Sharp Historic Site executive director and curator**

COURTESY



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## By Dena Miller

To some it may seem inexplicable why Taos--a tiny town nestled in New Mexico's high mountain desert--became the vortex for an American art movement of such national and international significance over the course of a century. But to Davison Koenig, the Couse-Sharp Historic Site executive director and curator, it's perfectly understandable.

"The arrival of those who would come to be known as the Taos Society of Artists was a perfect storm of circumstances, the timing of which coincided with a burgeoning interest in the American Southwest," he said. "They didn't just visit here; they settled here. And so they became a colony with a common and concerted vision, which was to share with the rest of the world an authentic depiction of Native culture and the American Southwest landscape."

Today, the site--owned and operated by The Couse Foundation and including the homes and studios of founding artists E. Irving Couse and J. H. Sharp--is a fascinating step back into time, but is poised to become the future's singular research center dedicated to Taos as one of the most important art colonies in the country's history.

With an initial endowment from the Peter and Paula Lunder family, The Couse Foundation has launched an \$8 million capital campaign to turn the former Mission Gallery, adjacent to the site, into a state-of-the-art museum facility.

"The Lunder Research Center will house original documents and correspondence, photographs, prints, negatives, sketchbooks, and original works of art. It will also include an extensive library and scholarly papers relating to the Taos Society of Artists, Native American art, and other ethnographic items," Koenig said, noting the overwhelming support for the center from museums, scholars and donors across the country.

"Our story is a significant national one," he explained. "It's one of Taos being an intellectual center as much as a collective community of artists."

Koenig is but one of several young visionaries under whose guidance the town's museums are experiencing their own Renaissance moments, ensuring that the heavy mantle of history doesn't suffocate the relevancy of Taos as an art colony.

For Daniel Barela--newly appointed as Executive Director of the Taos Historic Museums and President of its board--that means preserving his generations-deep heritage in New Mexico and educating newcomers on traditions he wishes to see kept alive.

His oversight role includes the E. L. Blumenschein Home and Museum on Ledoux Street, and La Hacienda de los Martinez on the outskirts of town. "We envision using [the] Blumenschein as a venue for ongoing exhibitions of emerging artists, in honor of its heritage as one of the homes of the founding artists of the Taos Society," Barela said.

But the 1804 Martinez Hacienda is in a class by itself as one of the few remaining "grand houses" of the Southwest. Barela envisions the sprawling property as a unique opportunity to be an educational epicenter with its riverfront grounds, courtyards, and dozens of rooms.

“In my mind there is more to art than that which hangs on a wall,” he said. “There is art in the simple things in life like making adobes, tin working, plastering, building your own home, or fishing and growing your own food. The hacienda is a perfect location to educate our children beyond the classroom.”

Barela is the great-grandson of Patrocino Barela who became the first Mexican American artist to receive national acclaim after his Spanish colonial wood carvings were included in a 1936 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Following in his family’s footsteps, Barela is also a wood carver who sold his wares at Spanish Market in Santa Fe as a young boy and, early on, “made a thousand dollars and learned the value of being able to take care of yourself.”

“The opportunity given to me as the executive director of these historic properties is to pay forward and share all I’ve been blessed to have learned,” he said.

Just down the road from the Blumenschein home, Juniper Manley has taken on the stewardship of another formidable Taos institution: the Harwood Museum of Art of the University of New Mexico. It’s the second oldest museum in the state and has, at its center, the Agnes Martin Gallery which is an internationally acclaimed crown jewel.

“Taos will never get tired or be a dusty relic so long as we continue to preserve what precedes us and remain mindful of the future,” she said.

“We in Taos have seen a demographic shift with the move away of generational Hispanics whose void has been filled with immigrants who may not have the leisure time to consider ‘creativity.’ But creativity is a savior. Our job is not to be token art; it’s to be accessible and inclusive.”

“So many museums are patriarchal by nature; the spoils of war or cultural dominance, and all that,” Manley continued. “But what’s exciting to us is how the artistic roots of Taos are intertwined on so many levels with its tri-cultural heritage, and how we can use that to establish an authentic voice representing the entire community.”

Christy Schoedinger Coleman, the recently appointed executive director of the Taos Art Museum at the Fechin House, expressed a similar regard in her role as steward of the historic property.

“We have to be sensitive to ESOL [English for speakers of other languages] so that we are relevant,” she commented. “Otherwise, the museum’s resources aren’t being used optimally. Then, we need to address the value of community building and focusing on our strength in early learning and in supporting our veterans and seniors. A museum, if properly utilized, can fill voids in what others would see as non-traditional roles.”

“To me, the bottom line is that art is a way to get a message across. It’s the voice of society in a moment of time, and its continuum is the voice of where society is going.”

She is now in charge of the historic home of Nikolai Fechin, an acclaimed Russian artist who arrived in Taos after the dismantlement of the Society but while many member artists nevertheless remained. He remodeled the home and left behind a legacy of art that remains amongst the most profound of Southwestern artists.

The museum’s website states, “It is presently estimated that there are more artists, per capita, in the Taos area than in any other city in the world, including Paris, France.”

“There’s no doubt in my mind that Taos has inspired more artists, including the contemporary ones, than any other place,” Schoedinger Coleman affirmed. “What we maintain here at Taos Art Museum is the energy to inform and inspire both today’s and tomorrow’s artists.”

Schoedinger Coleman is particularly excited about how all of the museum’s executive directors are regularly meeting to brainstorm and support of each other.

“There’s only collaboration here, on how we can work together and keep the energy going,” which, she noted, was still attracting world-class artists to move to Taos. “Our discussions are supportive of each other and how we can continue this momentum.”

The most recent appointee is Greta Brunschwyler, now Executive Director at the Millicent Rogers Museum, and her enthusiasm for her new role is infectious.

“Yes,” she laughed, “I’m already included in the monthly get-togethers. And we have so much to talk about with regard to how the art we represent reflects the voices of our society, how our resources can be used in early learning, and how we can build the strength of our community.”

The namesake of the museum would be proud. Rogers, a New York heiress who once dated Clark Gable, settled in Taos and spent most of her time engaging with and supporting the Native and Hispanic cultures. Today, the museum has rotating exhibits of her acquisitions which represent the best of native cultures, and which Brunschwyler wields as an interpretive tool to enforce the value of the museum itself.

But her message is clear. “We’re strong together,” she said of her compatriots. To the benefit of Taos, “We can totally rock this.”