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## Timeless images

**New exhibit displays the photographic studies of Taos Pueblo models by E.I. Couse**



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**Courtesy Couse Foundation**

**The exhibit of Pueblo portraits on view at the Couse-Sharp Historic Site's Luna Chapel, on Kit Carson Road.**



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Can you imagine a treasure trove of 8,000-plus photographic negatives and contact prints taken by Taos Society of Artists founder E.I. Couse? It's a curator's dream, a scholar's bonanza and an archival wonder.

On Saturday (July 6), the Couse-Sharp Historic Site will open its seasonal exhibition with "Taos Pueblo Portraiture: The Photographic Studies of E. I Couse" in the site's 1835 Luna Chapel. The exhibit will showcase contact prints made by Couse from his photographic studies of Taos Pueblo models.

"One thing that I think is important that I'd like to get across in the show is that these models, by posing - it speaks to the relationship between artist and the model," remarks Davison Packard Koenig, executive director and curator for the Couse-Sharp Historic Site.

Couse photographed men and women from Taos Pueblo from the early 1900s till his death in 1936. According to Koenig, he used seven or eight models multiple times, forging close relationships with some. Most of the models, such as Ben Lujan, Tonita Harvienguero and Jerry Mirabal, have been identified.

Ben Lujan, one of Couse's favorite models, became an integral part of the family. "In a way he was like my father to me," said Virginia Couse Leavitt, who has been tireless in preserving her grandfather's legacy. "He really was part of the family. I can remember being at the Pueblo with his wife."

"Definitely his paintings are about the individual and that's an important thing with Couse and the Taos Society of Artists [founded in 1915]- these are no longer Native Americans, these are individual people, and that's why we want to reach out to the extended families of these models because they need to see these photos because they are just incredible," remarks Koenig.

Think of the preliminary photographic studies to be Couse's artistic prelude. The film was developed in a darkroom that he built in the corner of his studio. Next, he would grid the photo, bring the model back into the studio and paint from real life. Couse was meticulous.

"There is such an intensity in the photographs -- it is different from what he captures on canvas," Koenig explains.

"I think that's really neat because you get a glimpse into that moment in time," Koenig said. "It's different from his final piece, because it gets us a little closer to the source. It's more immediate because it feels like we are in the room with that person."

According to letters and documents, Couse purchased his first camera in Paris while studying under William Bouguereau at the Académie Julian. Photography was gaining momentum in the late 19th century and Couse quickly realized he could introduce black-and-white photographic studies into his artistic process.

Of further interest is that Couse managed to develop and print so many images before Edison and Tesla discovered electricity. According to Koenig, Couse used a red kerosene lamp and hauled in jugs of water. He mixed up the chemicals in porcelain enamel trays. Moreover, Couse developed his contact prints using nitrate negatives. Nitrate film was the medium of the day and turned out to be highly volatile. According to Koenig, many a theater burned down when nitrate film got caught in the projector reel and set off a fire.

Today, the 8,000-plus collection is located in cold storage for preservation. "They are in shockingly good shape," archivist and collections manager Marissa M. Hendriks said. The next step is digitizing the prints and negatives. It's a massive project and the Couse-Sharp Foundation intends to replicate them on-site, but it doesn't yet have equipment and complex computer programming needed, Hendriks said. A grant for the necessary infrastructure is in the works.

Central to the photographic exhibit is Couse's iconic 1920s' painting "Indian Fireside." The artist's entire artistic process has been put together piece by piece. First, there is the gridded photograph of model Leonadro Bernal. Next, we see the actual moccasin, coiled basket and redware storage jar that are in the painting. The storage jar, an excellent example of Ohkay Owingeh pottery, sits outside the display case on a pedestal. According to Koenig, the display is exceptional in that we have complete insight into the Couse's process culminating in "Indian Fireside."

"What is significant is that at the turn of the last century, most artists or their estate would destroy the photographs because it was revealing too much of the artist process," Koenig said. "Photography was seen as cheating by some folks, so a lot of artists who had these unbelievable collections of photographs - their families wanted to make them disappear for fear that it would hurt their legacy and their auction price."

Instead, as the show helps us understand, another layer is revealed in an important part of the Taos historic and artistic legacy.

The show will be on view through November 2. The Couse-Sharp Historic Site is located at 146 Kit Carson Road, just east of Taos Plaza. For more information, call (575) 751-0369 or visit [couse-sharp.org](http://couse-sharp.org) (<http://couse-sharp.org>).