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ART TALK

Virginia Couse Leavitt plans art talk at Harwood Museum

Grandpa's footsteps



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Rick Romancito

Virginia Couse Leavitt, photographed beneath a portrait of her grandfather E.I. Couse, at a 2015 roundtable discussion of descendants of the Taos Society of Artists at the Taos Community Auditorium.

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By Virginia L. Clark

Summer art colony sojourns were all the rage in France in the 1900s. Students and professional artists flocked to the French countryside to paint and beat the Paris heat. Michigan student Eanger Irving Couse met bride-to-be and fellow art student Virginia Walker at one of the summer sessions, and the rest ultimately became Taos history.

Couse and fellow artist Joseph H. Sharp, whose studios and homes comprise the Couse-Sharp Historic Site on Kit Carson Road in Taos, are well-known painters who co-founded Taos Society of Artists in 1915, of which Couse was the society's first president. But the four summers leading up to Couse and company locating in Taos are the subject of an art talk coinciding with a major Couse House exhibit opening this weekend, titled "Full Circle: Taos Pueblo Contemporary." (See Cover Story, page 24)

The Couse Foundation presents Virginia Couse Leavitt, E.I. Couse's granddaughter, in a lecture titled "In My Grandfather's Footsteps," which will be given Saturday (July 7), 10 a.m., in the Arthur Bell Auditorium at the Harwood Museum of Art, 238 Ledoux St.

Using PowerPoint and illustrated by her grandfather's art-student sketches and photographs, Couse Leavitt will present a lecture based on research trips she and her late husband Ernie Leavitt made to Europe in the 1980s, tracking the "artistic travels" of grandfather Couse and two fellow art students of Academie Julian in Paris, tracing where the art students spent their summers at different French art colonies.

Besides E.I. Couse's imagery from the Couse family archive, Virginia and Ernie Leavitt had a rare treasure trove of 176 letters written by her grandmother, Virginia Walker Couse, notably detailing places and names of the art colonies they stayed, including the Isle of Wight in the English Channel, Concarneau, Çernay-la-Ville and later Etaples in 1893. Etaples is where the Couses lived for three years, birthing their genius inventor son, Kibbey Whitman Couse (Couse Leavitt's father) in 1894, before moving permanently to Taos in 1896.

"Those letters are a source of information that would not have been available anywhere else," granddaughter Couse Leavitt says of her namesake's letters. More on the vital correspondence is available in a biography of E.I. Couse, coming out from University Press in the Spring of 2019. Couse Leavitt followed in her artistic grandparents' footsteps by taking her master of fine arts in art history and becoming an authority and E.I. Couse expert.

Couse Leavitt has innumerable stories and anecdotes concerning the restoration of the Couse-Sharp Historic Site that would make interesting reading in themselves. One tidbit is that when she and Ernie Leavitt moved back to the Couse-Sharp site in 1991, she said, "We'd find all these archival things everywhere - like sales and exhibition records all in with the cookbooks!"

Since taking over the Couse-Sharp site in 1991, grandmother Virginia Walker Couse's famous flower garden has been all but restored and is glorious, despite the record drought. Inventor son Kibbey Couse's machine shop and laboratory is now available to view, and J.H. Sharp's second, larger studio is also available for touring, and so much more.

Doors to the Harwood Museum will open at 9:30 a.m. Saturday. Tickets for the art talk are \$10, and \$8 for museum members. Seating is limited, however, so to purchase advance tickets, call the museum store at (575) 758-9826. Also, visit couse-sharp.org.

