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# WESTERN ART

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*Joseph Henry Sharp's studios in Taos were a gathering place for artists and friends who were drawn to the Southwest's culture and beauty.* BY PETER H. HASSRICK



**Editor's Note:** This is an excerpt from Peter H. Hassrick's new book, *The Life & Art of Joseph Henry Sharp*, published by the Whitney Western Art Museum at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, in association with the Lunder Research Center at the Couse-Sharp Historic Site. The book will complement the *Joseph Henry Sharp Online Catalogue*, which will launch later this year at [www.sharpartcatalogue.com](http://www.sharpartcatalogue.com).

Sharp's many studios—a rare buffalo hide tepee, a windowless art school attic space, a well-lit Munich apartment, an elegantly decorated atelier in Cincinnati, a simple adobe church in Taos, two flimsy wooden shacks at Crow Agency, a creaky sheep wagon on Montana's snowy prairie, and a comfortable and commodious adobe treasure house in Taos—all provided forceful, inventive environments, inspirational ambiance, sanctuaries for self-identification and forums for social and intellectual intercourse that enabled Sharp to thrive and create. Nowhere did Sharp's creative vision reveal itself more abundantly than in his cherished home in Taos.

During Sharp's early prolonged stays in Taos during the summers of 1897 and 1898 his accommodations rustic, "a small adobe house at or near the pueblo." His studio was, out of necessity, the patio that separated buildings. There, under the brilliant sunlight he produced portraits like *Concha*, a brilliant, early and rare watercolor. *Concha* had been a governor at Taos Pueblo, so Sharp selected model citizens of the tribe to represent.

In 1909, after spending most winters in Montana and summers in Taos, Sharp purchased a former dance hall on Kit Carson Road, just up the street from the old scout's house. After lengthy efforts to repurpose that building as their new home, they also acquired a historic Penitente chapel next door. It was there that Sharp established his first serious Taos studio, one he called his "Bell Chapel" or "Chapel Studio." There he was able to complete some of his most remarkable studio works of his early career, like his chef d'oeuvre. *The Broken Bow* was one example out of what he referred to as a pair of "life-size figure" paintings that were "better than any former work." *The Broken Bow* was a testament to cultural and familial endurance. It was a primary piece in a large show of his work at the University Club in Cincinnati that year and went on to be his

**Joseph Henry Sharp (1859-1953),** *The Broken Bow, Father and Son*, ca. 1912, oil on canvas, 44½ x 59¾". Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming. 7.75.



**Joseph Henry Sharp (1859-1953).** *Studio Interior [A Corner of my Studio]*, ca. 1925, oil on canvas, 20 x 27<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub>". Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, Arizona. Gift of the Carl S. Dentzel Family Collection. 1985.136.

featured painting at the National Academy of Design's annual spring exhibition in 1913.

In 1915, he built an expansive, new, two-story adobe studio on the west side of his house, pitched his Blackfeet buffalo hide tepee next to it, and again filled the studio with Indian relics. When the painter, writer and teacher Ernest Peixotto visited Taos in 1916, he was enthralled with Sharp's "new and large studio in the pueblo style, in which he now works and stores his rare and precious collections of baskets, mats and costumes."

At this time, Sharp was searching for national recognition as a painter. The new studio provided the perfect ambiance to express his creative genius through such elegant canvases as *The Red Olla*. His beloved model, Crucita,

was posed in broad, clear light and seated on an adobe *banco*. She holds a peach-colored shawl in both hands and touches a water jar with her right hand. The gesture embodies grace and affection portrayed with a sense of personal, reserved interiority that Sharp allowed his model to enjoy. Crucita seems deep in thought. When *The Red Olla* was exhibited in Cincinnati in January 1918, his favorite art critic, Mary L. Alexander, acknowledged its importance immediately. "*The Red Olla*...is really a most beautiful arrangement of Crucita: the fascination this picture has for one springs from many sources while the beauty of Crucita fairly haunts one and the arrangement and harmony of line are almost Whistleresque in its statement."

Outside the walls of studio were verdant gardens established by Sharp's first wife, Addie, and nourished by her sister and Sharp's second wife, Louise. He was especially enamored of the luscious hollyhocks that would inspire countless outdoor studies over the years such as *Leaf Down at Studio Door*. The gardens became a studio in themselves and painting them brought the artist great joy.

Sharp's home and studio stood within the confines of a high adobe wall compound. It was sealed off from the street by robin's-egg blue entry gate. Sharp found many intriguing subjects beyond those perimeters. In fact, the scene just outside his front gate captured his attention and became an extension of his studio. He made several paintings of it in the



Joseph Henry Sharp (1859-1953), *The Red Olla*, ca. 1916, oil on canvas, 16½ x 20¼". Denver Art Museum, Denver, Colorado. 1989.148.

late teens and early '20s. *Kit Carson Road and House, Taos* is one such version. It featured his two favorite Pueblo female models, Crucita and Leaf Down, relaxing from their work to enjoy the sun-dappled street, the bustle of Indian passersby, and the early autumn light that brightened the huge cottonwood trees bordering the road. Sharp was also acutely interested in the fact that Kit Carson's house was just down the way on the right. The historical association pleased him greatly.

Further beyond his gate, Sharp enjoyed painting *en plein air* in the fields, arroyos and aspen forests around Taos. In 1922 he wrote to his old Crow Agency friend Samuel G. Reynolds that he and Louise had recently purchased an automobile. Now, Sharp wrote, "most work out of doors & stuff I wouldn't get otherwise." As a consequence, he could enthusiastically boast that "I work more than ever." Of the sixty paintings in his annual Cincinnati winter exhibition that year, he included no fewer than eight listed collectively as "The Aspen Forest, New Mexico." As reported in the local press, "Mr. Sharp has followed a new bent this year and that is



Joseph Henry Sharp (1859-1953), *Kit Carson Road and House, Taos*, ca. 1925, oil on canvas, 25½ x 31½". Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma. Gift of the Thomas Gilcrease Foundation, 1955. 0137.386.



Unknown photographer, *Bell Chapel Studio*, 1924, photograph, black and white, C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, Montana.

to picture the wonderful aspen that grow along the mountains of his beloved Taos."

In these same years, Sharp turned his studio into a motif for self-portraits in paint, as well. Following a trip to France and Spain that the Sharps took in 1922 and a second visit to the Prado Museum and the Velázquez galleries there, the artist experimented several times with inserting himself into paintings of the studio with his models. The most accomplished and complex version of this self-promotional homage to Velázquez's *Las Meninas* was *Studio Interior [A Corner of my Studio]*. It pictures Crucita and her son Francisco enraptured by a Pueblo song. As a neo-Baroque conceit, it sets the artist beside his models, thus animating both parties and confirming their interdependence.

It is as if the three subjects were enjoying a creative, symbiotic relationship. The models perform for the painter and he, in turn, records the recital in paint.

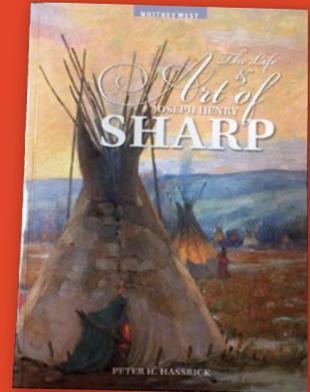
By the early 1930s Sharp's studio collection had been pared down mostly to his current work and a select few remnants of artifacts he hung from the balcony at the end of the room, as in his portrait of *Bawling Deer*. His patrons were far-flung, but from time to time someone other than a troublesome tourist came to call. As Sharp phrased it in 1933 during the Depression, "There have been no picture sales in three years," and "I have to give over to the tourists who want to see a studio &...a real artist. Can't bluff the tourists unless we see their *car*, for once in a while some one *does*

buy!" He had learned the hard way when several years earlier, in 1926, he had ignored knocks at the door from John D. Rockefeller Jr., who was calling to buy paintings. His next-door neighbor, Irving Couse, teased Sharp mercilessly that evening as, having been more alert and accessible, he had sold Rockefeller almost a thousand dollars' worth of paintings. Fortunately, Sharp was able to make some equally substantial sales to Rockefeller the next day.

Sharp's formal Taos studios bounded by the streets and mountainsides that surrounded him retained his focus for over 50 years. He only abandoned this enchanting space in his last years that were spent in a house in Pasadena he normally used in the winters. His Taos studio was a workspace, a gathering place for his many friends and fellow artists, a creative sanctuary and his eternal pride and joy. ☞



Joseph Henry Sharp (1859-1953), *Leaf Down at Studio Door*, ca. 1928, oil on canvas, 22 x 18". Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma. Gift of the Thomas Gilcrease Foundation, 1955. 0137.349.



Peter H. Hassrick is a writer and independent scholar of American art who focuses on the West. He is Director Emeritus and Senior Scholar at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming. He is also the Director Emeritus of the Petrie Institute of Western American Art in at the Denver Art Museum, Founding Director Emeritus of the Charles M. Russell Center at the University of Oklahoma, and Founding Director of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe. He was with the Buffalo Bill Center of the West for 20 years and also served as the Curator of Collections at the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, for five years.