

Bert Geer Phillips and His Neighbors

Bert Phillips's life in Taos is well known. It began in the summer of 1898, when he and fellow art student Ernest Blumenschein came to Taos on a painting trip, a legendary event that has always marked the origin of the Taos Society of Artists (TSA). Rather than sur-

Vecinos y Amigos: Bert Geer Phillips and His Neighbors is on view through February 28, 2025, at the Couse-Sharp Historic Site, 138 and 146 Kit Carson Road, Taos, New Mexico, 87571, 575-751-0369, www.couse-sharp.org.

vey Phillips's entire body of Taos work—Taos Pueblo and its people, landscapes, architecture—*Vecinos y Amigos* seeks to

expand our knowledge of specific paintings in which people in the Hispano community modeled.



All illustrated images are by Bert Geer Phillips.

RIGHT: *Taos Valley, N.M.*, c. 1915, o/c, 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 19 $\frac{11}{16}$, Harwood Museum of Art of the University of New Mexico, gift of Robert Desky.

BELOW RIGHT: *The Santero (The Santosmaker / His Favorite Santo)*, 1917, o/c, 30 x 26, The American Museum of Western Art, The Anschutz Collection.

LEFT: *Our Washerwoman's Family—New Mexico*, c. 1918, o/c, 40 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 41 $\frac{5}{8}$, New Mexico Museum of Art, gift of Governor and Mrs. Arthur Seligman, before 1930.

Paintings of Hispano subjects are rare for the TSA. Research into the models' families and recognition of who they were allows a new understanding of Phillips's working method and greater insight into how paintings were conceived to fit the existing market—and appeal to the stereotypes held by potential buyers.

By focusing on these few remarkable paintings, some of his best work, the exhibition identifies the people, sets them in cultural and historical context, and enriches with their own stories Phillips's visual narratives about friends and neighbors. With one exception, these paintings are not portraits as such, but imaginative *tableaux* in which people served as actors in stories that Phillips felt would have success, both in broadening his reputation on the exhibition circuit and in finding buyers among a public fascinated by, but largely ignorant of Southwestern cultures.

Knowing more about these neighbors of Bert Phillips—in the broadest sense—gives significance to those who have long been unrecognized, broadening our view of the larger social dynamic of Taos. Guest Curator James C. Moore, Couse-Sharp Historic Site (CSHS) staff, and members of the organization's Hispano Advisory Council conducted research into the models, their descendants, Phillips's life, his attitudes toward other cultures, and his paintings, including the objects, both sacred and everyday, depicted in them. This work has broadened the scope of The Lunder Research Center, a prime illustration of the kind of enrichment of narratives that CSHS aims to provide for the education of our friends and neighbors, and the greater public.

Phillips's major effort in 1917 was *Our Washerwoman's Family*. In the painting, the





ABOVE: *Lady, Please Buy One Chicken*, c. 1935-1938, o/c, 38 x 25 1/2, Albuquerque Museum, Albuquerque High School Collection, 1985 General Obligation Bonds.

LEFT: *Spanish Girl of Taos (Esperanza Rael)*, c. 1940-1947, o/c, 29 1/2 x 19 1/2, location unknown, photograph courtesy of Sotheby's, Inc., © 2024.

RIGHT: *Three Musicians of the Baile*, c. 1920-1921, o/c, 39 1/2 x 42, New Mexico Museum of Art, gift of Governor and Mrs. Arthur Seligman, before 1929.

viewed the work at the exhibition published a favorable review. Though some of the speculative details were inaccurate, it nevertheless showed that the image provoked contemplation and imagination.

Again Tomás Barela was the model for the fiddler in *Musicians of the Baile*. The other two models in this painting have not been identified. It is unknown at this time whether any of the three men were actually musicians. The painting can be seen as a group portrait, or it can be interpreted as a scenario that Phillips created in his own mind that he felt would make a successful, and sellable, subject.

Musicians, including fiddlers, were synonymous with many gatherings in Taos, including weddings, festivals, and dances. In 1918, due to the Great Influenza epidemic and World War I, Red Cross benefit dances were common in the town as advertised in *La Revista de Taos*.

Phillips family “washerwoman” is signaled by the bundle the elderly woman carries in a Pima/Akimel O’odham basket, but the actual laundry worker was Ignacita, the young woman on the end of the bench. She was recently divorced from Francisco Medina, a grocer in Llano Santa Barbara, a *colonia* near Peñasco. She, her daughter, Maria, and two young sons were newly moved in with Guadalupe and Tomás Barela.

Barela also modeled for *The Santero*. He is seen holding a *retablo* (a two-dimensional

devotional painting) and surrounded by several other examples of northern New Mexican *santos*. A Pueblo *olla* (pottery jar, possibly from Cochiti) sits atop the Valdez carved chest. The painting was created concurrently with *Our Washerwoman’s Family*, and also shown at the Museum of New Mexico, where it was titled *The Santosmaker*. For an exhibition at the University of Oklahoma, Phillips retitled the painting *His Favorite Santo*. Today, it is commonly known as *The Santero*. A writer who



Our Washerwoman's Family, *Three Musicians of the Baile*, and *The Santero* were exhibited in Santa Fe in 1925 and purchased by Arthur Seligman, the new president of the First National Bank. They were hung in the bank and *The Albuquerque Journal* ran a headline, "Buy New Mexican Pictures." It mentions the "Spanish speaking population of the State" and encouraged the idea of purchasing such New Mexican scenes for other public buildings throughout the state.

By 1930 Seligman donated *Our Washerwoman's Family* and *Musicians of the Baile* to the Museum of New Mexico. *The Santero* remained in the family for several generations. Seligman, who owned a prominent

mercantile business in Santa Fe, held a number of public positions, including mayor of Santa Fe from 1910 to 1912 and governor of New Mexico from 1931 until his death in 1933.

Twenty years after Phillips's first success with Hispano subjects, he painted a boy named Elias Casias. At the time of the painting, Elias was about six years old, one of the ten children of Felipe and Paublina Casias. The Casias family owned a farm in Talpa, about five miles south of Taos.

The painting, then titled *Lady, Buy One Chicken?* was shown in 1938, in the twenty-fifth Annual Exhibition, *Painters and Sculptors of the Southwest*, at the School of

American Research, Museum of New Mexico. It was the frontispiece in the catalog and was reproduced on the cover of *El Palacio* magazine.

In 1939, the work won first place in an exhibition at Western State College in Gunnison, Colorado. No one purchased the painting, and it was in Phillips's inventory for ten years. Large exhibition paintings by the TSA were priced high and not easy to sell. Some of them finally went to school systems in Chicago, St. Louis, and Albuquerque. *Lady, Please Buy One Chicken* was sold to Albuquerque High School in 1948 for pennies on the dollar.