

FRATERNITY **ROW**

BY JOSEPH TRAUGOTT

“A Place Like No Other,” a series inspired by the creation of the New Mexico History Museum, is devoted to exploring New Mexico History through new research and recent insights of curators, artists, collections managers, educators, historians, archaeologists, and ethnohistorians—work that will inspire lines of inquiry and exhibitions for years to come.

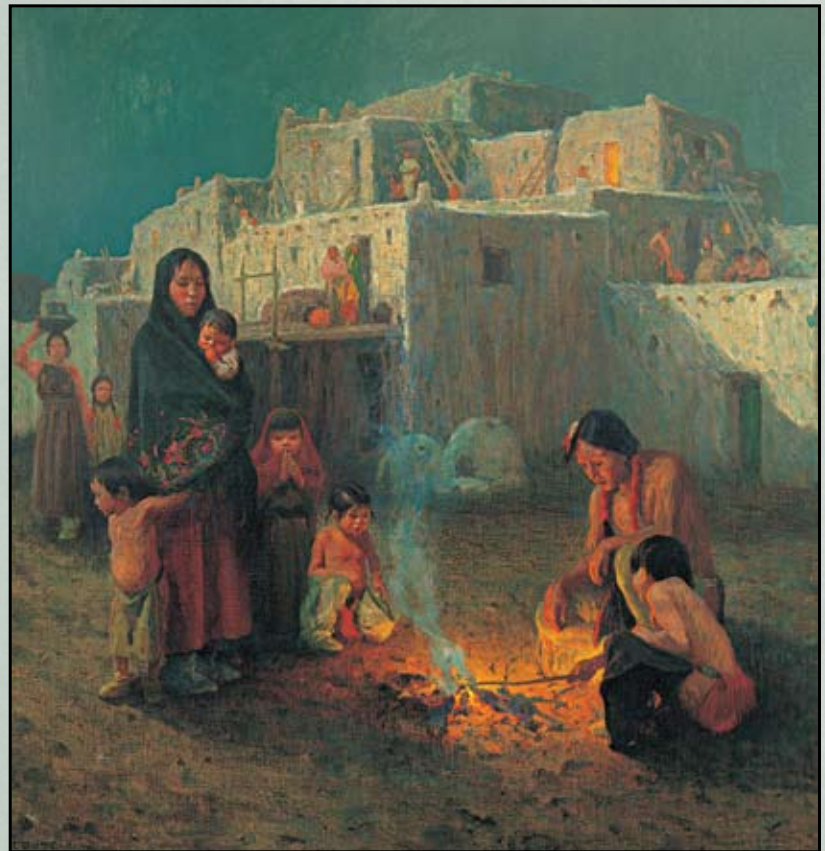
Just as the extraordinary light in the skies over New Mexico drew artists from the East, it may have blinded some to the true merit of their work. Too often that which was created by newcomers was favored over the art of longtime resident-artists. In “Fraternity Row,” Joe Traugott steps away from his role as curator of twentieth century art at the New Mexico Museum of Art, to become art critic and art historian, shedding a brighter light on the art colonies and the precise part they had in the development—and appreciation—of New Mexico art.

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OVER THE LAST NINE DECADES, THE ACADEMIC REALISTS

of the Taos Society of Artists developed into the best-known painters of the Santa Fe–Taos Art Movement. Not necessarily the best, just the best known. By the time these artists made their way to New Mexico, academic art in Europe had already become an anachronism, and was retreating in America. In my opinion, they were the best only if one believes the end of academic realism in New Mexico to be historically more important than the beginning of aesthetic modernism during the twentieth century.



E. Irving Couse (1866–1936), *Taos Pueblo—Moonlight*, 1914, oil on canvas, 60 x 60 in. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Gift of Kibbey W. Couse, 1930.



Alfredo Montoya (Wen Tsiroh, ca. 1890–1913), San Ildefonso Pueblo, *Deer and Antelope Dancers*, ca. 1912, watercolor and pencil on illustration board, 14 x 19 in. Gift of Edna and Fred W. Henry, courtesy of John and Linda Comstock and the Abigail Van Vleck Charitable Trust, Museum of Indian Arts & Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology (35467/13).

Screen: Architectural details from the New Mexico Museum of Art building.

Paintings such as E. Irving Couse's 1914 canvas *Taos Pueblo—Moonlight* epitomize the romantic depictions of indigenous peoples predictably associated with the Taos Society. Couse, a founding member of the society, painted the scene as he imagined it to have looked in a mythic past. He presented Taos Pueblo as a theatrical set for displaying “noble savages” living

in harmony with nature. This painting alludes to the erroneous belief that Pueblo society would be absorbed into mainstream American culture, and disappear.

The Taos Society of Artists promoted the idea that they were the first, best, and only artists working in New Mexico. The success of paintings like *Taos Pueblo—Moonlight* encouraged many people to agree with the society's propaganda. Ironically, however, the aesthetic terms associated with the Taos Society's self-promotional arguments—like “art” and “artist colony”—have blurred the historical record. Now enough time has elapsed so that it is possible to rethink the impact of academic art and the Taos Society of Artists on New Mexico art.

The reinstallation of the New Mexico Museum of Art collection in 2007 offered me an opportunity to rethink the history of New Mexico art in the twentieth century. The exhibition *How the West Is One* created a single chronology composed of Native American, Hispanic and European American art. This process clarified the history and illuminated popular myth-interpretations of New Mexico art.

WHO BENEFITS FROM THE OPEN DOOR POLICY

THE TAOS SOCIETY OF ARTISTS PROMOTED THE IDEA THAT THEY WERE THE FIRST, BEST, AND ONLY ARTISTS WORKING IN NEW MEXICO.

Robert Henri, the anti-academic artist from New York City, painted in Santa Fe during the summers of 1916 and 1917 at the invitation of Edgar Lee Hewett, the director of the Museum of New Mexico. Henri's larger-than-life *Portrait of Deguito Roybal, San Ildefonso Pueblo* is a fine example of his paintings from New Mexico. Unlike the staid, almost photographic realism of the academic painters, Henri's use of contrasting colors and his loose painting style emphasizes his modernist reaction to the charismatic drummer. Yet to twenty-first century eyes, the visual differences seem small between academic paintings and their anti-academic opponents.

During his stay in Santa Fe, Henri convinced Hewett, the director of the Museum of New Mexico, to implement an open door policy at the New Mexico Museum of Art. The policy ensured that any New Mexico artists would be able to exhibit at the museum without the approval of a jury or an academy. The museum's open door policy played an important role in the development of the Santa Fe-Taos Art Movement, as the local art scene was called. But the policy also opened the door for arguments that developed between the partisans of academic and anti-academic art.



Just a year before the opening of the New Mexico Museum of Art in 1917, Paul A. F. Walter argued in *Art and Archaeology* that the European American painters working in New Mexico were “virile and prophetic” artistic pioneers. The Santa Fe–Taos Art Movement—as Walter described it—was composed of academic painters creating ethnic images and landscapes from the Southwest. The details rendered in these realistic paintings gave these images the illusion of ethnographic accuracy.

Walter, the associate director of the Museum of New Mexico, credited Hewett with elevating the painters of the Santa Fe–Taos Art Movement from a mere passing phenomenon into a “creative force of lasting value in American art.”

Of course, Walter’s and Hewett’s pronouncements did not mean that Native Americans and Hispanics creating important works of art, only that European Americans were. When Hewett organized the first exhibition at New Mexico Museum of Art in November 1917, he included thirty-eight artists in the display. None was Native American or Hispanic, despite the fact that Hewett had commissioned Crecencio Martinez to paint a series of watercolors defining dancers from San Ildefonso Pueblo ritual cycle. The implication was clear: only European Americans made art, and the door to the museum was open to them.

I LIKE IT BUT IS IT ART?

The members of Taos Society of Artists argued that they represented the first artist community in the Southwest. This may be true only if one accepts their Euro-centric definition of an artist. Like most people who were part of mainstream American culture early in the twentieth century, they defined art in terms of what European American artists produced. In practice, art meant painting in a realistic style, by a painter from a privileged strata of society who probably had trained in Europe. This definition excluded Hispanics and Native Americans from the Southwest, and the objects they made.

Ironically, the academic artists working in New Mexico were also known for their collections of Native American and Hispanic art that they used as props for their southwestern scenes. However these painters did not consider this material art. Nor did most people. As indigenous objects were replaced by machine made goods after the 1880s, dealers sold these functional articles to outsiders—and painters—as artifacts of vanishing cultures.

left: William Penhallow Henderson (1877–1943), *Awa Tsireh*, 1917, oil on canvas, 24 x 18 in. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Gift of Amelia Elizabeth White, 1962.

right: Alfonso Roybal (Awa Tsireh, 1895–1955), *San Ildefonso Pueblo, Basket Ceremony*, ca. 1922, watercolor on laid paper, 12½ x 21 in. Courtesy of John and Linda Comstock and the Abigail Van Vleck Charitable Trust, Museum of Indian Arts & Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology (24358/13).

At the time, most European Americans accepted the conventional wisdom and thought of Native and Hispanic arts as trinkets, not art. Now, it is readily accepted that Native and Hispanic people make art. However, changing definitions of art challenge the claims by the Taos Society of Artists that they were the first art community in the Southwest.

WITH OTHER ANTHROPOLOGISTS, HEWETT VALUED THE FIRST PUEBLO WATERCOLORS AS VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY MADE FROM A PARTICIPANT'S PERSPECTIVE, NOT AS A WORK OF ART.

HEWETT ORGANIZES THE SANTA FE PROGRAM

Beginning around 1908, Hewett and scholars from Santa Fe began working to “revive” Native art forms that were rapidly disappearing. Hoping to promote economic development at San Ildefonso Pueblo, Hewett encouraged the creation and sale of artistic commodities. These activities contradicted federal government efforts to assimilate Native peoples into the cultural mainstream, and to discourage the practice of their arts, religions, languages, and life ways.

As director of the Museum of New Mexico, Hewett encouraged Maria Martinez, the potter from San Ildefonso Pueblo, to make fine pottery modeled after the polychrome ceramics from the nineteenth-century. He also supported young men from the Pueblo, such as Alfred Montoya who were making the first watercolor paintings of ritual dancers from the Pueblo.

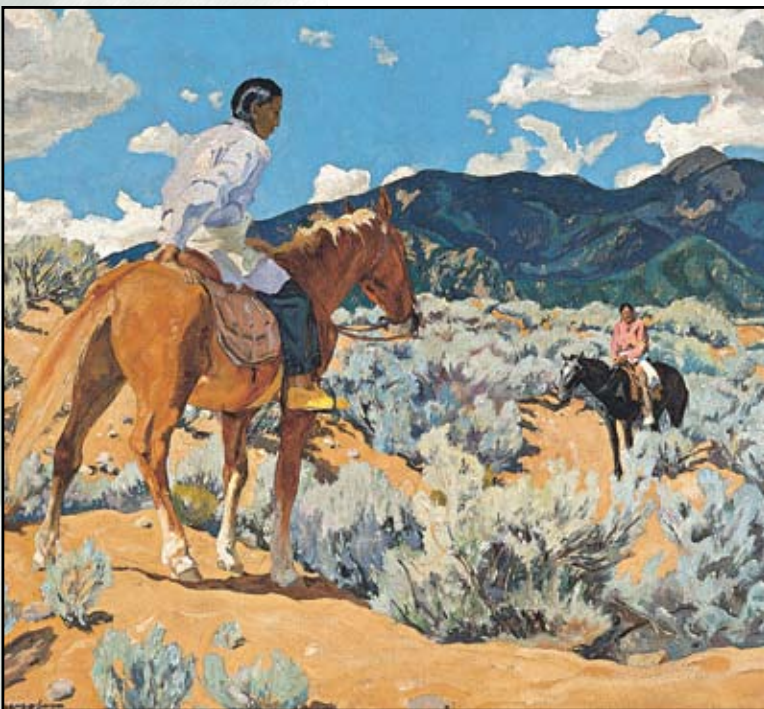
Hewett called his development project the Santa Fe Program. This intercultural program formed an artist community—a social grouping composed of artists, promoters, commercial interests, scholars and buyers. And as an artist community, the Santa Fe Program predated the founding of the Taos Society of Artists in 1915, if by only a year.

With other anthropologists, Hewett valued these first Pueblo watercolors as visual ethnography made from a participant's perspective, not as a work of art. Nonetheless, the association of the artists with the Museum of New Mexico served to institutionalize the efforts of both the San Ildefonso potters and painters.

The Pueblo potters and painters also found strong backing from the anti-academic artists who were being drawn to Santa Fe. William Penhallow Henderson, his wife, Alice Corbin, and philanthropists including Mabel Dodge Luhan supported the Pueblo easel painters and collected their paintings. San Ildefonso painter Awa Tsireh became a close friend of Henderson's, and one of the most accomplished Pueblo painters of

dance images during the late teens. Henderson's portrait of Awa Tsireh underscores the social ties between the San Ildefonso artists and their Santa Fe supporters.

Interpretations of Native made objects changed quickly, particularly after Marsden Hartley began publishing articles describing Pueblo ritual dance as the original American art form. In 1919, the museum opened its doors to group exhibitions of watercolors by Pueblo artists, and then in 1920 displayed examples of Maria and Julian Martinez's newly invented matte-on-black pottery. Nonetheless, the European American artists associated with the Santa Fe-Taos Art Movement dominated the exhibitions at the Museum of Art.



Jozef G. Bakos (1891–1977), *The Springtime Rainbow*, 1923, oil on canvas, 29½ x 35½ in. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Gift of Jozef G. Bakos in honor of Teresa Bakos, 1974.

DIVIDING THE SANTA FE-TAOS ART MOVEMENT INTO FRATERNITIES

Almost as quickly as the Santa Fe–Taos Art Movement jelled into a recognizable artistic paradigm, it began to split in multiple directions. The terms “Santa Fe art colony” and “Taos art colony” soon replaced the Santa Fe–Taos Art Movement. These terms only confused the situation by implying that the art produced in both towns was aesthetically different.

The first division of the Santa Fe-Taos Art Movement occurred in July 1915, when six well-connected painters formed the Taos Society of Artists. The Taos Society presented itself as a colony or a community. But in reality, they functioned as an artistic fraternity—a professional association of male artists of the same class and aesthetic taste. Other fraternities followed: bohemians formed the Cinco Pintores and the anti-academic moderns later formed the New Mexico Painters.

The opening of the Museum of Art with its open door policy attracted anti-academic painters to Santa Fe. These artists were excluded from exhibitions at eastern museums that were controlled by academic juries and dominated by academic outlooks. Painters like William Penhallow Henderson and B. J. O. Nordfeldt had seen the work of Cézanne when the 1913 Armory Show was presented in Chicago. Nordfeldt’s painting *Antelope Dance* clarified dramatic differences with run of the mill academic paintings. The anti-academic artists created their own modernist fraternity, only without a formal organization.

By 1920, the differences between the academic and anti-academic fraternities flared into political struggles. The Taos Society of Artists responded to the jingoism of World War I and approved measures to use patriotism to underscore their artistic dominance. They banned aliens from membership in their club, and then tried to have the federal government deport Taos artist Henry Balink back to his native Holland. Politicians got into the act when the Santa Fe New Mexican editorialized against the anti-academic painters and concluded that the new Art Museum was showing “Bolshevik art.”

The Santa Fe–Taos Art Movement also attracted younger, less well-trained artists who had been heavily affected by World War I. Some of these artists also suffered from respiratory problems, and were part of a wave of “lungers” who came to New Mexico for health reasons. These bohemians organized an exhibition of their paintings at the New Mexico Museum of Art in 1921, and then organized themselves into another fraternity, the Cinco Pintores (the Five Painters).

At first their paintings presented modernist views of New Mexico, such as Jozef Bakos’s *The Springtime Rainbow*. However, while these paintings were aesthetically interesting, they did not sell well. Soon the Cinco Pintores were producing quaint images that attracted buyers during the tourist boom of the 1920s. The bohemian artists became popular characters in Santa Fe after the group disbanded—free spirits associated with the party atmosphere surrounding the Santa Fe-Taos Art Movement, and its supporters.



José Dolores López (1858–1937),
Expulsion from the Garden, 1920s, carved
wood, 14½ x 1½ x 8 in.
and 14 x 14½ x 5 in. Museum
of International Folk Art, gift of the
Historical Society of New Mexico.

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FADING INTO THE SUNSET

Throughout the late teens to the thirties, academic painters represented the majority of artists in both towns. Their work dominated the annual “Fiesta Exhibitions” at the museum, and the smaller displays in the museum’s alcoves. Consequently, the aesthetic differences between the art of Santa Fe and the art of Taos was minuscule.

The visual differences between the academic and the anti-academic artists all but disappeared during the 1920s. The academic artists moved to incorporate modernist ideas, while the anti-academic artists lost some of their edge. The best example of the declining differences between aesthetic perspectives occurred when the most adamantly anti-academic artists—Henri and Sloan—actually joined the Taos Society of Artists as associate members. Blumenschein’s turn in a modern direction can be seen in his 1923 painting *Dance at Taos*. This painting is not concerned with realist accuracy, but rather Blumenschein’s own reactions to the dance. The small canvas emphasizes the color, sound, motion, and rhythm of the scene in a big way. And by 1927, the organized fraternities had simply withered away.

During the mid-1920s, some New Mexico modern artists and philanthropists opposed the production of cheap tourism trinkets and formed the Indian Arts Fund to collect examples of the best Pueblo pottery. Some of these artists and supporters also formed the Spanish Colonial Art Society to encourage a revival of the Hispanic arts that had all but disappeared with the influx of machine made goods after the 1880s. José Dolores López’s *Expulsion from the Garden* is a good example of the work promoted by the society, but these efforts were cut short by the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression.



Ernest L. Blumenschein (1874–1960),
Dance at Taos, 1923, oil on canvas,
27½ x 30½ in. Collection of the
New Mexico Museum of Art.
Gift of Florence Dibbell Bartlett, 1947.

WHO’S ON FIRST?

The row between artistic fraternities in New Mexico seemed irreconcilable during the teens and twenties. Looking back, the differences between the academic realists and the anti-academic modernists can seem small and petty. From a twenty-first century context, it is less important to discuss the aesthetic feuds among mainstream American artists than to think about the dismissal of indigenous arts, and the art terms that connote aesthetic exclusion.

The terms “Santa Fe art colony” and “Taos art colony” are anachronisms from the early twentieth century and do not accurately reflect the development of New Mexico art. Using them implies support for the partisan, European American-only arguments promoted by the Taos Society of artists. But more importantly, these terms imply agreement with the denigration of Native American and Hispanic art as non-art. Even today, when someone in New Mexico mentions the word artist, many people assume the discussion concerns a person of European American heritage.

And finally, contrary to popular beliefs, the artists of the Hispanic revival and the Santa Fe Program played key roles in the development of New Mexico art. It makes more sense to describe the artists working in New Mexico before World War II as the Santa Fe–Taos Art Movement, and to describe it as an intercultural movement composed of European American, Native American, and Hispanic artists. From this perspective, the Santa Fe–Taos Art Movement represents a complex fusion of aesthetic ideas and artists associated with the Santa Fe Program, the Taos Society of Artists, the New Mexico Painters, the Cinco Pintores, and the Spanish Colonial Art Society.

Joseph Traugott, Ph.D., is curator of twentieth century art at the New Mexico Museum of Art and the author of *The Art of New Mexico: How the West Is One, The Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts* (now the New Mexico Museum of Art); Museum of New Mexico Press, 2007. Read other articles in the history series at elpalacio.org.