

The Taos Society of Artists, 1915-1927

UW Art Museum, fall 2006
Educational packet developed for grades K-12

Introduction

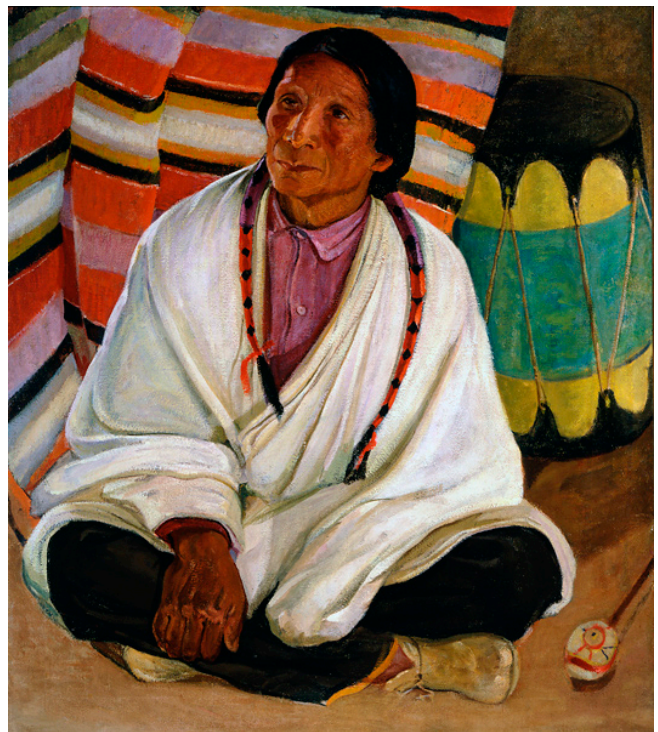
In the early 20th century, artists began to make their way to the American Southwest, intrigued by the landscape and the Pueblo culture of the region. In Taos, a group of twelve artists would band together in their quest to paint the land and people of northern New Mexico. Founded by Ernest Blumenschien, Bert Phillips, Oscar E. Berninghaus, E. Irving Couse, Joseph Henry Sharp, and William H. Dunton in 1915, the group, known as the Taos Society of Artists, grew to include Victor Higgins, E. Martin Hennings, Julius Rolshoven, Catherine Critcher, Walter Ufer, and Kenneth Adams. Their work introduced the country to the landscape and Indian culture of the region and was essential in establishing Taos as an artist center that attracted such important 20th century Modernist artists as Georgia O'Keeffe, Stuart Davis, John Marin, and Marsden Hartley. *The Taos Society of Artists, 1915-1927*, presents examples of each of the twelve members of the group through the generous loans of the Harwood Museum (University of New Mexico), and several private collectors. (Funded in part by John and Mari Ann Martin and the National Advisory Board of the UW Art Museum).

History

The Taos Society of Artists

When their wagon broke a wheel outside of Taos, New Mexico during a sketching trip from Denver to Mexico in September of 1898, neither Ernest Blumenschein nor Bert Phillips could have imagined the far-flung consequences of this seemingly unfortunate accident. After losing a coin toss to Phillips, Blumenschein began the twenty mile trek into Taos (where the nearest blacksmith was located), awkwardly balancing the broken wheel on his reluctant horse. As difficult and arduous as this journey was, it was also an artistic watershed for the young painter, an event that would change his life forever. Blumenschein's recollection of the experience reflects the impact that New Mexico had upon him:

No artist had ever recorded the superb New Mexico I was now seeing. No writer had ever written down the smell of this air, or the feel of that morning's sky. I was receiving under rather painful circumstances, the first great unforgettable inspiration of my life. My destiny was being decided as I squirmed



Catherine Critcher (American, 1868-1964), *Portrait of Star Road*, not dated, oil on canvas, 37 x 32 inches, courtesy of the Haub Family Collection

and cursed while urging the bronco through those many miles of waves of sagebrush . . . The sky was a clear, clean blue, with sharp, moving clouds. The color, the effective character of the landscape, the drama of the vast spaces, the superb beauty and serenity of the hills, stirred me deeply.

I realized I was getting my own impressions from nature, seeing it for the first time with my own eyes, uninfluenced by the art of any man. Notwithstanding the painful handicap of that broken wheel I was carrying, New Mexico inspired me to a profound degree.

My grunting horse carried me down and across the gorges, around the foothills over long flat spaces that were like great lakes of sage-brush, through twenty slow miles of thrilling sensations. It had to end in the Taos Valley, green with trees and fields of alfalfa, populated by dark-skinned people who greeted me pleasantly. There I saw my first Taos Indians, picturesque, colorful, dressed in blankets artistically draped. New Mexico had gripped me – and I was not long in deciding that if Phillips would agree with me, if he felt as inspired to work as I, the Taos valley and its surrounding magnificent country would be the end of our wagon trip, Mexico and other lands unknown could wait until the future.



Walter Ufer (American, 1876-1936), *Evening Rays*, not dated, oil on canvas, 25 x 25 inches, courtesy of the Haub Family Collection

Not only did Phillips agree to stay and work with his friend, but within three months of their arrival he had made Taos his permanent home. Although Blumenschein later claimed that “none of us went there to found a colony, it just grew,” the Taos Society of Artists became the first artists’ group to create a significant body of work based on the landscape of northern New Mexico and the local Pueblo Indian culture. From the idyllic romanticism of Phillips and Eanger Irving Couse to the cubist experiments of Victory Higgins, the Taos Society of Artists was a collection of diverse individuals, in terms of both artistic style and personal character. Yet as a group they were highly organized and aggressively self-promotional. Their success was immediate, and as a result the Taos Society of Artists became the means through which both the members and Taos itself rose to national prominence.

The prehistory of the Taos Society of Artists can be traced to Phillips and Blumenschein’s encounter with Joseph Henry Sharp in 1895, while all three were studying at the Academie Julian in Paris. Sharp had visited Taos two years earlier on assignment for *Harper’s Weekly*, and while in Paris regaled the younger artists with his vivid recollections of the region. When Phillips and Blumenschein journeyed to the area in 1898, they joined Sharp in his enthusiasm for Taos. After his return to New York (some three months later), Blumenschein maintained an active correspondence with Phillips, who had become an outgoing host for visiting artists. Motivated by his passion for the region as well as his isolation, Phillips urged Blumenschein to recruit painters for what he hoped was a fledgling art colony . . .

Phillips did not remain lonely for long. Oscar Berninghaus, a St. Louis illustrator hired by the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad to sketch New Mexico and Colorado, befriended Phillips upon his initial visit in 1899. Eanger Irving Couse most likely met Phillips, along with Blumenschein and Sharp, at the Academie Julian in 1896; he made his first visit to Taos in 1902, presumably on Blumenschein's advice. In 1912, while teaching at the Art Students League in New York, Blumenschein likewise encouraged his student, Herbert Dunton, to visit Taos; Dunton settled in Taos permanently later that year. When these six men banded together in July of 1915 to form the Taos Society of Artists, Sharp, Phillips, and Dunton were permanent residents, while Blumenschein, Berninghaus, and Couse were regular summer visitors.

As the Taos Society grew slowly but steadily in both numbers and national recognition, more of its members began to settle permanently in Taos, bringing their families and dedicating themselves wholly to the Southwest. Whereas the Taos Society founders primarily received their training in New York and Paris, Walter Ufer, Victor Higgins, and E. Martin Hennings were associates from Chicago and the Royal Academy in Munich. Each of these artists made their first visits to Taos on the advice of Chicago mayor and art patron Carter Harrison. After his first visit in 1914, Ufer considered Taos his primary home, although he continued to advance his reputation by exhibiting extensively in Chicago. Within a year of his arrival in Taos (also in 1914), Higgins likewise became a permanent resident. In 1919, after considerable negotiations with his wife, Blumenschein settled in Taos; Hennings followed suit in 1921. Although he did not join the Taos Society until 1926, Kenneth Adams had become a permanent resident upon his arrival two years earlier. Berninghaus eventually moved to Taos in 1925, and Couse established residency in 1927, the same year the Society disbanded.



Victor Higgins (American, 1884-1949),
Spanish Well, not dated, oil on canvas, 27 x
19-3/4, courtesy of the Haub Family Collection

Not all of the Society's members chose to relocate, however. Julius Rolshoven lived in Taos for approximately five years during World War I, before returning to Italy – his primary home for most of his life – around 1920. Catharine Critcher likewise did not stay; she summered in New Mexico during the 1920s, returning to her successful career in Washington, D.C. each winter, where her portraits of the local Pueblo Indians receive wide-spread acclaim. That Rolshoven and Critcher never established residency in Taos helps explain why they are all too often overlooked in literature on the Taos Society, despite the fact that they both enjoyed active membership status and successful careers in new Mexico as well as Italy and Washington, respectively.

While they were not the first to paint New Mexico (John Mix Stanley had visited the area as early as 1846; Worthington Whittredge worked in Santa Fe and Taos in the mid 1860s, and Thomas Moran painted the Northern Pueblos in the 1880s), the Taos Society members were responsible for establishing a national reputation for the region. Although the Society's growth in membership was gradual, its rise to national prominence has been described as meteoric. How was this phenomenal success achieved in such a relatively short period of time? From its inception, the Society established for itself a set of guidelines by which it closely controlled its membership, in terms of both the caliber of artists asked to join and the subjects they painted. At the Society's first meeting, the six founders decided that future nominees

for membership must have worked in Taos for at least three years or part of three years and were required to have participated in a juried, representative American exhibition. In 1917 the Society decided members would be allowed to show only southwestern subjects in the annual exhibition circuit. The bylaws were further amended in 1919 to state that all members had to be American citizens. Together, these measures ensured an appropriate degree of aesthetic and thematic hegemony to the annual exhibition circuit, and that all members were focusing on the regional landscape and culture as they worked towards the common goal of creating a distinctly “American” art. The group also established a class of associate members – artists who exhibited with the Society, thus boosting the audience for and sales potential of the annual exhibition circuit. To this group they added nationally distinguished painters such as Robert Henri, John Sloan, and Randall Davey.

The Taos Society of Artists,
Master&Masterworks, Gerald Peters Gallery, Inc.,
1998.

Artist Statement

One of the founding fathers of The Taos Society of Artists, Ernest Blumenschein, on a sketching trip from Denver to New Mexico, said:

No artist had ever recorded the superb New Mexico I was now seeing. . .

The sky was a clear, clean blue, with sharp, moving clouds. The color, the effective character of the landscape, the drama of the vast spaces, the superb beauty and serenity of the hills, stirred me deeply. I realized I was getting my own impressions from nature, seeing it for the first time with my own eyes, uninfluenced by the art of any man. . . New Mexico inspired me to a profound degree. (1898)



Julius Rolshoven (American, 1858-1930), *Taos Indian Man*, not dated, oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches, courtesy of the Haub Family Collection

Lesson Overview

Students will learn about the history, culture, works, and painting techniques used by The Taos Society of Artists, which includes; Joseph Henry Sharp, Bert Geer Phillips, Ernest L. Blumenschein, Oscar E. Berninghaus, Eanger Irving Couse, William Herbert Dunton, Walter Ufer, Victor Higgins, Julius Rolshoven, E. Martin Hennings, Catharine C. Critcher, and Kenneth Adams. They will learn about the history of this small but influential artist community that helped to put Taos on a cultural, artistic, and historical map forever. They will learn how these Taos painters were attracted by the culture; the mix of Hispanic, Anglos, and Indians of Taos Pueblo. How they were attracted by their boyhood fantasies of the Wild West and the light, landscape, and color. They will learn about the artists' backgrounds in the art world and their connections to each other which began for some in Paris. They will learn about their education and experiences which led them to join the society in Taos. Students will learn about how the society marketed and sold their paintings and about how they traveled to exhibit their work. They will learn about the fame they garnered in New York and other cities of artistic stature.

Students and teachers will consider the concepts behind the art work. They will discuss how the artists' European influences in painting show in their works, and how they moved away

from those influences developing an “American” art. They will discuss art techniques used in the creation of these paintings in the exhibit. They will also discuss how, in particular, Victor Higgins and Kenneth Adams were moving away from the realistic techniques to the new Modernism in art.

In the Shelton Studio students will be given the opportunity to try their skills at drawing and painting in similar styles as the Taos artists’ exhibit. Students will be given the opportunity to mix paints for certain colorful effects. Students and teachers will start conversations about the work of the Taos Society of Artists on the culture, landscape, light, color, shapes, lines, volume, and history of the Taos region. They will be given the opportunity to continue their conversations in their home classrooms and schools.

Students and teachers may research and engage in conversations about the work of The Taos Society of Artists before arriving at the art museum, using study guides (available on-line) to explore ideas. While here they will spend time in the galleries closely observing the work, discussing it, writing about it and even sketching it. They will begin conversations about the theories behind the work which will lay the groundwork for future opportunities to pursue these ideas in their home classrooms and schools.

Essential Questions

- Is it possible to capture the culture, landscape, color and light of a land and people so that viewers of art can understand this culture as it is and appreciate it for exactly what it is?
- How does a “sense of place” influence an artist in her or his work? In particular, how can the northern New Mexico region of Taos and Taos Pueblo influence, inspire, and profoundly affect an artist and the work of the artist?
- Is it possible to produce highly individual and original work in a society of artists who live and work very closely together in a relatively small region of the country?
- Is it possible for artists working and living so closely together to inspire and challenge one another?
- Is it possible for a group of artists to promote each other’s work and sell work within that group without “selling out” to a commercialism or public demands.
- Is it possible to create a demand for original art of high quality by a group of philosophy driven or like-minded artists?

Art Questions to Consider

Grade levels K-12

- Which of all of the paintings are your favorites?
- Which artist appeals to you the most? Why?
- What ideas and feelings are you left with after observing these paintings closely?
- Which paintings look like illustrations for a textbook or magazine on Taos people and landscapes?
- Which of the Taos artists portray the Indians in the most realistic or representational of ways? Use details to support your response.
- Which of the Taos artists portray the landscape in the most realistic or representational of

ways? Use details to support your response

Grade levels 7-12

- What are Renaissance techniques in painting? What is meant by Classical doctrine in painting? What artistic techniques and elements belong to the European school of painting?
- Why did The Taos Society of Artists say that they created an “American Art “in Taos? How is it different than the European model of the nineteenth to the late nineteenth century?
- Which of the paintings exhibits the use of deep, rich colors and a strict sense of spatial geometry and rhythm?
- Which of the paintings exhibits the artist’s interest in formal integrity and harmony rather than a desire to accurately portray Pueblo culture?
- Which of the Taos artists’ exhibits tightly painted and strictly composed scenes that are influenced by his European training?
- Which of the Taos artists exhibits a less romantic picture of the Taos Indians and of the Taos landscape?
- Which of the Taos artists’ Indian subjects demonstrate a stoic attitude to the pressures of modernization and which paintings allude to the difficult transition Pueblo culture underwent during the early twentieth century?
- Which of the Taos artists captures the dazzling New Mexican sunlight which results in a dramatic use of shadow and lively, patterned surfaces?
- Which of the Taos artists exhibits the most stylistically flexible and experimental paintings?
- Which of the paintings show Modernist tendencies of broken forms, strong, clean lines reduced to natural shapes of geometric essentials of line, volume, and color?
- Do you see any religious values at work in the paintings?

Pre-visit Activities

In order to prepare students for their museum visit and extend learning possibilities, we suggest that teachers and students consider the following activities:

Grades K-12

- Students will read about and research, at least, one or two of the Taos Society of Artists and his or her work.
- Students will read and research Taos, the Taos Pueblo, and the geography of Taos and the northern New Mexican region.

Grades 7-12

- Students will read and research European painting techniques and Renaissance techniques in painting in art magazines, books at the library and on the internet.
- Students will read and research Modernism in painting in the early twentieth century.

Museum Activities

Part 1 – Time frame: 45 minutes

- Students will closely observe The Taos Society of Artists, 1915 – 1927 exhibit in the Chicago

and East galleries.

- They will identify the different compositional styles.
- They will identify the different painting techniques.
- Students will discuss what they see with museum educators.
- They will explore how the paintings portray Taos people and landscapes.
- Using worksheets, students will respond in writing or drawing to the work they see by recording their observations and their own thoughts about the work.
- Students will answer questions on a museum worksheet.
- Students will discuss how these paintings affect them emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually.
- Students will engage in discussions about their observations and their answers and sketches with one another and with the teachers.

Part 2 – Time frame: 45 minutes (minimum suggested time)

The following projects may be considered individually, or combined, or museum staff will work with teachers to develop specific projects which support ongoing classroom work.

- Students will use their favorite paintings as models to produce a painting in a similar style.
- Students will compose their drawings on canvas with pencils before attempting to mix paints.
- Students will learn how to mix paints to get desired colors and effects.
- Students will learn how to apply paint on canvas for different effects.
- Students will learn how to layer paint for desired color, texture, and effects.

Post-visit activities

We have found that students achieve maximum benefit from a museum visit when time is scheduled for post-visit activities. Here are some suggestions:

- Students discuss or write about their museum experiences, reviewing what they learned, what has special meaning for them, how they will use new information and skills.
- Students continue to research The Taos Society of Artists and their impact on the culture they painted.
- Students continue to research the painting techniques these artists used.
- Students create paintings on a culture and landscape of their choice.
- Students do a series of paintings from this culture and landscape.

Prerequisite skills/knowledge

Museum staff will work with teachers to ensure that all projects are age and skills appropriate. At the very minimum:

- Students should have some familiarity with sketching objects.
- Students should be able to manipulate paint brushes and paints.
- Students should be able to identify colors and shapes and lines.

Suggested use in the curriculum

The study of The Taos Society of Artists, 1915-1927, plus the historical, cultural, and artistic knowledge gained from studying the work of The Taos Society of Artists ties to multiple curricular areas including; art, social studies, geography, history, writing, reading, philosophy, sociology,

anthropology, business, and marketing. Museum staff will work with teachers to address specific Wyoming Teaching Standards and to align museum projects and studies with ongoing classroom curricular units.

Some recommended resources

These are just a few of the many resources available. We welcome other suggestions that teachers and students find helpful which can be added to this list.

- UW Art Museum website: www.uwyo.edu.artmuseum
- Exhibition descriptive materials (contact the museum education program for more information).
- *The Taos Society of Artists, Masters & Masterworks*, Gerald Peters Gallery Inc., Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1998.
- *Taos Society of Artists*, Taos Society of Artists and Robert R. White, 1998.
- *Twentieth Century Russian and Eastern European Painting by John E. Boulton and Nicoletta Miskler*, 1992.
- *Color and Technique in Renaissance Painting Italy and the North* by Marshall Hall, 1997.
- *European Painting and Sculpture, Circa 1779 to 1937*, Daniel Rosenfeld.
- *Pueblo Indian Painting: Tradition and Modernism in New Mexico, 1900-1930*, by J.J. Brody.

Materials to be supplied to each student

Materials for selected Shelton Studio projects are provided by the art museum.

Assessments and documentation of museum tour and studio experiences

In order to ensure that our museum tour program is meeting the needs of teachers and students, we ask that participants complete evaluation surveys. Surveys will be distributed to teachers and students, but they are also available on-line as a *pdf* file to be downloaded, or they may be requested via e-mail (wbredeho@uwyo.edu).

1. Students will self-assess using a quick survey that asks them to consider their response to the gallery discussions and research, and their studio experience.
2. Teachers will assess the overall visit by completing a quick survey that asks for their observation and assessment of students' experiences, as well as assessment of the overall process of the museum visit.
3. Museum staff and artists/teachers will record their observations and assessments.
4. When studio time permits, we will ask students to briefly discuss their art work completed in the Shelton Studio visit.
5. Museum staff may take photographs of students and teachers to document the learning taking place and the work produced during a museum visit. These are available upon written request to teachers who would like to use them as part of teaching and student portfolios.