

The Taos Society of Artists, 1915-1927 Study Guide

The Taos Society

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.

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 Taos Society of Artists, Masters & Masterworks*, Gerald Peters Gallery

The work of the twelve members of *The Taos Art Society*, Ernest Blumenschein, Bert Phillips, Oscar E. Berninghaus, E. Irving Couse, Joseph Henry Sharp, William H. Dunton, Victor Higgins, E. Martin Hennings, Julius Rolshoven, Catherine Critcher, Walter Ufer, and Kenneth Adams, introduced the country to the landscape and Indian culture of New Mexico and was essential in establishing Taos as an artist center that attracted such important 20th century Modernist artists as Georgia O'Keefe, Stuart Davis, John Marin, and Marsden Hartley.

Many of the artists used deep, rich colors and a spatial geometry and rhythm that spoke of the land and people. "Some of the artists were interested in formal integrity and harmony rather than a desire to accurately portray Pueblo culture." (*The Taos Society of Artists, Masters & Masterworks*, Gerald Peters Gallery)

Look closely at the paintings on display. Select the work of at least two artists and compare them. Closely examine the colors they use, their brush strokes, and the composition of each piece.

- How are the paintings of the selected artists similar? How are they different?
 - How would you describe the colors the artists use? Use comparisons to help you express the colors of the painting or paintings.
 - How would you describe the light and the darkness or shadows in the painting or paintings?
 - Look closely at the lines and shapes used in the composition of each painting. Is it possible for the artist to convey volume, even though the painting is on a flat surface?
- What patterns or repetitions of shapes, volume, lines, or colors do you see?
 - Are the brush strokes used by each artist similar or different? Does the choice of brush stroke influence your feelings about the painting or the subject?
 - Consider the people in the paintings. Are they happy, joyful, sad, angry, depressed, or indifferent about the land they live in? How can you tell?

- What contrasts do you find between people and land? Are there any similarities in how they are painted?
- As a result, what ideas and feelings about the Taos landscape and people are you left with?
- After experiencing all of the paintings and prints on exhibit, how would you describe the artistic relationship of the artists? For example, do you think they influenced each other, or does each artist's work stand alone?
- Based on your explorations of the paintings, do you think these artists capture are able to capture the culture, landscape, color and light of this Taos region so that viewers can understand this culture and appreciate it for what it is?
- Which of these artists do you think was interested most in capturing and conveying a "sense of place?" Which artists were most interested developing art that was seen as uniquely American?
- Which is your favorite artist and/or painting or print in this exhibit?

About the artists...

Unlike the majority of the Taos Society of Artists, Oscar Berninghaus was mostly self-taught and lacked the European training the other artists mostly shared. The European training was mainly academic and related much more to the nineteenth rather than the twentieth century.

In Paris, Ernest Blumenschein, Joseph Henry Sharp, and Bert Phillips, all receiving European training, met and influenced one another. All the artists had been searching for their own art, an American art.

Joseph Henry Sharp found the perfect American landscape, culture and people that spoke "American" to him in Taos and the Taos Pueblo. Sharp convinced the other founders to visit and settle in Taos. The other members of the society all had similar reactions to the Taos landscape and people.

Victor Higgins, one of the Taos society members/artists, returned from his European training depressed by the drabness of what he had been taught and by the foreign quality of the great paintings he had seen. He wanted to return to the youthful vigor of his own country and to find his own subjects and style of painting. He needed to make contact with the dynamic new art developments.

Each member brought his or her own unique style to the society and created an exciting new "American" regional art.

