

Artists Who Brought Taos Home

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TAOS, N.M., sprawls on a desert shelf 7,000 feet above sea level, embraced by three jagged mountain ranges -- the Sangre de Cristo, the Picuris Range and the Jemez and Nacimiento Mountains -- all overlooking the Rio Grande, which has carved a gaping gorge across the Taos valley.

Although home to Spaniards since the late 16th century, and to Pueblo Indians for hundreds of years before that, the dramatic country around Taos retains a distinctly raw and untenanted look. At sunset, the Sangre de Cristo peaks redden, revealing the source of their name; below, the valley falls into lavender shadow.

But the endless sky vaulting above the town is perhaps its most striking feature, with that clear, dry light. As D. H. Lawrence noted, "Just day itself is tremendous there." For the artists who visited the Southwest at the end of the 1800's, it was precisely this sense of limitlessness, along with the spectacular setting, that convinced them that dusty little Taos was the most inspiring place in America to paint.

It's been said that in the mountains, small accidents often engender great consequences, and certainly this was true in 1898 when Ernest Blumenschein, a young illustrator from Pittsburgh, broke a wagon wheel 20 miles north of Taos on his way to Mexico with a friend for a summer's sketching trip. As their wagon dangled over a canyon rim, the two men sat down to split a can of cold beans and a pickle, then flipped a \$3 gold piece to see who would ferry the wheel on horseback to the nearest village. Blumenschein lost, and with the wagon wheel balanced painfully on his shoulder, he rode off toward his first sight of Taos.

Years later, he called that uncomfortable trip "the most impressive journey of my life." It's still possible to sense Blumen schein's fierce excitement as the Taos Pueblo's adobe walls glow in the late-afternoon sun beneath soaring Wheeler Peak. "No artist had ever recorded the superb New Mexico I was now seeing," he wrote exultantly. "I realized I was getting my own impressions." He was seeing it for the first time, "uninfluenced by the art of any man."

A loquacious, brash, gifted and indomitably ambitious man, Blummy (as he was known to his friends) set out to claim Taos on canvas, and launched a sleepy adobe village toward becoming today's artistic mecca and ski resort, where tourists sometimes outnumber the residents.

After his first summer's visit, Blumenschein went back to New York and Paris, extolling the rugged beauties of New Mexico, returning whenever he could.

By 1915, he and five other artists had established the Taos Society of Artists. With his wife's inheritance, Blumenschein purchased four rooms in an adobe house on Ledoux Street built in 1797, and eventually persuaded her to move from New York. The house, with its subsequent additions, is now a museum. Along with the Fecchin Institute, it is one of two artists' homes from that period in Taos that can be visited by the public.

At the Blumenschein house, visitors can view not only a collection of his paintings, several of which also hang in the Santa Fe Art Museum, but also work by many of the artists who gathered in Taos during the 1920's and 30's. Scarcely a block from shops bustling with overpriced kachina dolls, Navajo rugs and turquoise-studded belt buckles, the Ernest L. Blumenschein Home and Museum persists as an elegant, eclectic glimpse into a very different Taos.

To her squat, rustic clay residence, the patrician Mary Greene Blumenschein brought French armchairs, red velvet curtains, Victorian lamps, a Victrola and a passel of Oriental rugs, all of which remain. She also brought their sickly daughter, Helen, a Unitarian fifth-grader from Brooklyn, who found herself plunked down in a Catholic school in a town where, the daughter wrote, there was "no mail, no snow plows, one Telegraph line to Taos junction, and perhaps half a dozen automobiles."

Helen flourished, and soon was riding horses and hunting turkeys while her Brooklyn counterparts pitched pennies on the sidewalk. Meanwhile Mary, also an artist and illustrator, began fixing up the house, unrolling rugs over the wooden floors, festooning lace curtains across the dining room windows, painting the trim yellow and, according to Helen, hiring a local war chief to paint the sitting-room walls Venetian red. Beside the sitting room's adobe fireplace, Mary hung Japanese wood-block prints given to Blumenschein by his students in New York. Soon she was collecting New Mexican furniture and art, and gradually the house acquired a colorful European-Southwestern accent of its own.

As was common in those days, the Blumenscheins bought a section of a house that was connected to other homes; when their neighbors died or moved, the family annexed sections until they had strung together 11 rooms, which allowed a studio for each of them. The result is a comfortable, low-ceilinged, flat-roofed house slung around a central courtyard, as unpretentious from the outside as the mud in its walls.

INSIDE, the house looks as if the Blumenscheins have just gone out for a walk, right down to a can of Del Monte tomatoes waiting on a kitchen shelf. Mary lingers especially in the bedroom, with its enormous French armoire and simple adobe fireplace adorned with a pair of tin candlesticks. For his part, Blumy is best glimpsed in his studio, an airy, light room with raised ceilings, hung with his oil paintings and still containing his easel, palette and a ghostly trace of turpentine.

It wasn't long after their move to Ledoux Street that the Blumenscheins' sagebrush enthusiasm was being shared by trainloads of sightseers and newcomers, from D. H.

Lawrence, Greta Garbo and Leopold Stokowski to young artists eager to capitalize on the country's blossoming love affair with the West. (It's an affair that continues; at last count, Taos boasted close to 100 art galleries.)

Mabel Dodge Luhan, a wealthy New York art patron, bought a ranch on the edge of town, where she reigned as the Southwest's grande dame. Especially for European visitors, Taos embodied America at its most legendary, a swashbuckling, egalitarian Van ity Fair, where rumrunners, cowboys, painters, farmers, Pueblo Indians and socialites all rode through town, nodding amiably to one another.

If Taos in the 1920's drew all types of visitors, it also drew all types of artists. Eight years after Blumenschein set up shop behind the hollyhocks on Ledoux Street, another painter began building a house on nearby Paseo del Pueblo Norte.

He was Nicolai Fechin, a successful Russian portraitist, who had recently moved from new York with his wife and teen-aged daughter, Eya. As reserved as Blumenschein was garrulous, Fechin wanted little to do with the gossipy, bohemian Taos art scene. He was after the "Real America," as Eya called it, which he found in the Southwest's immensity and quiet, which were reminiscent of his childhood in Kazan by the sweeping Volga River.

HE also wanted to create a home that merged his adopted land with his ancestry, a home that bespoke himself. Tolstoy wrote, "A Russian with nothing but an ax could build a house or shape a spoon." And in that spirit, Fechin and a handful of workers started building what Eya later dubbed "a Russian house evolved out of New Mexico mud."

Acting as his own architect, he made only a crude cardboard model before construction began, trusting that he would figure out the rest as he went along. Adobe, unlike wood, allows the builder to scoop out a doorway here, add a window there, and in this manner Fechin's two-story, 10-room clay mansion rose unpredictably among the cactus.

The final result is a cool, tawny folk tale of a house filled with curious niches and cabinets, whimsically carved wooden posts and heavy beams -- spacious and somewhat somber, halfway between a Russian woodcutter's cottage and a Pueblo church.

True to Tolstoy, the ax remained Fechin's tool of choice. What most visitors notice first about the house is its furniture, a sturdy, tactile collection of folk-art tables and chairs, all carved from clear white sugar pine by Fechin. In a book she wrote about her father, Eya describes his house as filled with carved, undulating forms that "almost cry out to be touched."

The son of an icon carver, Fechin loved the feel of wood, and he especially loved wood finished with an adze -- a hatchet-like tool with a curved blade that lends surfaces a rippled effect. He took his adze to corbels, lintels, ceiling beams. What looks coarse,

however, feels smooth; each surface has been sanded and polished to the texture of old leather.

Perhaps he caught his affection for incongruity from Taos itself, a community of European-trained artists surrounded by pinon and rattlesnakes. Again and again, Fechin strove to achieve unexpected harmonies, interweaving the rough-hewn with the stylized in the same way neighboring artists painted the Rio Grande using atelier techniques.

For instance, each of the house's 12 doors is of a different design; the very asymmetry of these doors extends the intelligent, quirky balance maintained throughout the house. And although most of the rooms are dark, especially compared with the daylight blazing outside, those adze-finished wooden surfaces are highly reflective, catching the light wherever it gleams.

Finally, Fechin decorated his house with Oriental art that, against all apparent odds, complements the Russian and New Mexican influences. The study harbors a few of his own pencil portraits, including a delicate sketch of his rather scrappy-looking dog.

MANY of his other paintings hang in museums throughout the West, from the Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City to the San Diego Art Museum. He was a man who appreciated contradictions. In the parched earth outside his front entrance, he dug a lily pond.

This ability to coax synthesis out of apparently discordant elements served Fechin well in everything but his marriage. In 1933, a scant six years after they arrived in Taos, his wife threw him out of the house. Fechin left the Southwest and his beloved Russian mud home and went back to New York with daughter Eya, eventually winding up in Santa Monica, Calif.

But years later Eya returned, still captivated by her impression of Taos as the "Real America." Now on the board of directors of the Fechin Institute, she has restored her father's house -- which, like Blumenschein's home on Ledoux Street, never left family hands until it became a museum in 1981.

A small, courtly, intent woman, Eya Fechin slips through the quiet rooms with her granddaughter in tow, supervising tour guides, pausing to answer questions. Asked what she considers to be the house's most extraordinary feature, she says in surprise, as if the answer should be self-evident, "It was composed to create harmony."