Couse-Sharp Site Connects the Past with Present

With the opening of a new 5,000-square-foot research center, the Couse-Sharp Historic Site enters a new era where life and art, Taos–style, are eternally entwined.

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BY **KELLY KOEPKE** / PHOTOS BY TIRA HOWARD

SHARE

Davison Koenig, executive director and curator of the Couse-Sharp Historic Site, and Ginnie Leavitt, E. Irving Couse's granddaughter and an art historian.

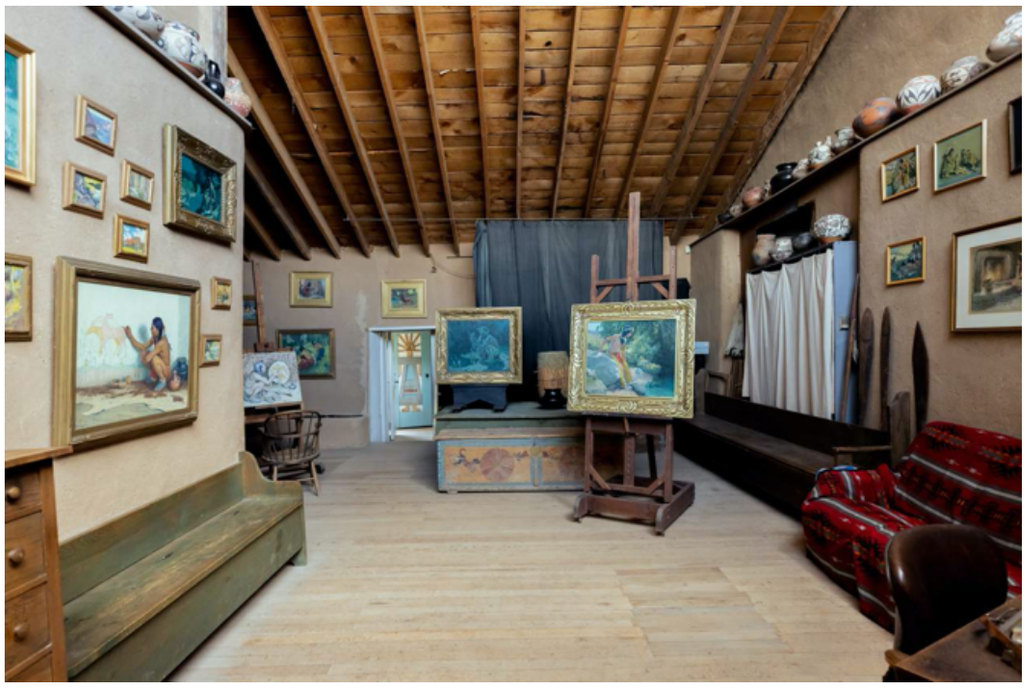
THE SMALL TOWN OF TAOS owes much of its prestige as an art-lovers' destination to a group of painters who hailed from Indiana, Ohio, New York, and other parts far east of the Rocky Mountains. In 1915, six talented transplants formed the **Taos Society of Artists** (TSA), driven by a shared mission to exhibit works with a dignified, if romanticized, perspective on Native American and Western life. Collectors,

institutions, and commercial enterprises fell under these artists' influence, showing their art and burnishing their reputation as a visionary group that was changing the way the world saw the American West.

Ground zero for this legacy? The humble abodes of Joseph Henry Sharp and E. Irving Couse, two of the society's founders, who shared a passion for the traditional cultures of northern New Mexico. Collectively, their neighboring houses and studios, gardens, and workshops are called the **Couse-Sharp Historic Site**.

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places and a quick walk from the Taos Plaza, the site is among Taos's best-kept secrets—a time capsule of early-20th-century creativity in an isolated corner of New Mexico.

Since 2010, tours of the labyrinthine two-plus-acre spread have passed carved wooden gates, low doorways, and wonder-filled rooms. Common, unassuming adobe walls and narrow passages give way to spaces bursting with saturated color from hundreds of the painters' ornately framed oil portraits and landscapes, as well as historic furniture and the now antique tools used by the two artists.



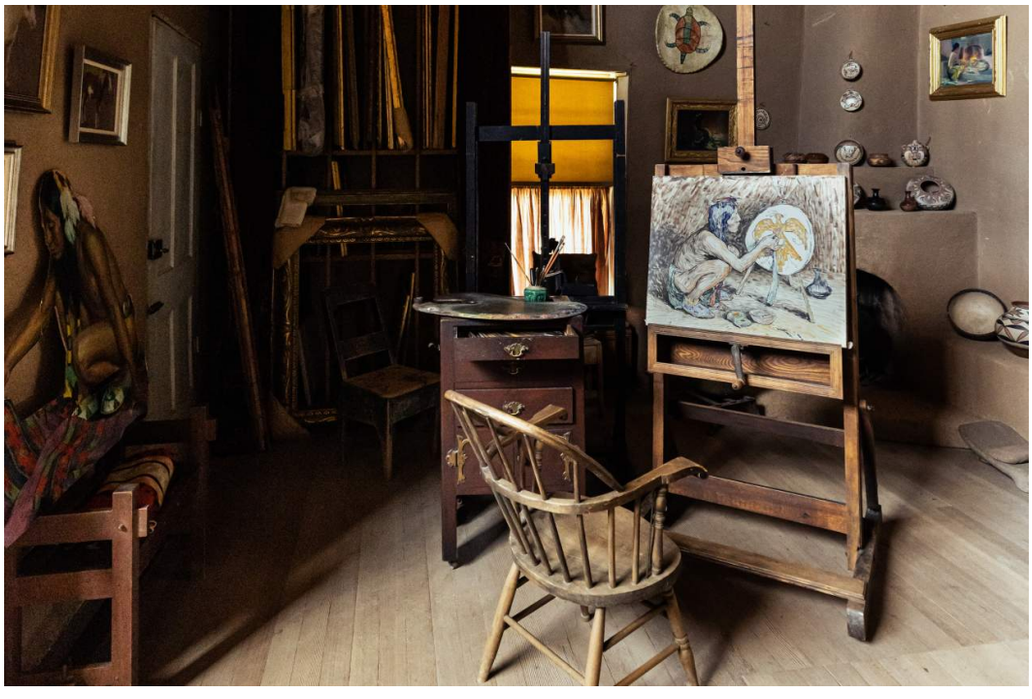
The studio of E. Irving Couse, now part of the Couse-Sharp Historic Site in Taos, was a gathering place for artists.

In October, the site dedicated something new: the 5,000-square-foot **Lunder Research Center**. Formerly the Mission Gallery, the building quietly opened in 2021 to house thousands of preserved documents, photographs, and artifacts, along with works by Couse, Sharp, and other members of the TSA. Researchers and visiting artists can dive into the materials with the hope of making new discoveries and deepening connections between these artists and the place they called home.

"The Couse home, studio, and gardens—when combined with the Native American and Spanish colonial art, photography, archives, letters, and other material we have—represents the largest extant collection of any American artist of this national stature," says Davison Koenig, executive director and curator of the **Couse-Sharp Historic Site**.

Despite their relative—and deliberate—distance from the rest of the art world, both Couse and Sharp were well-known artists who saw great commercial and critical success. In 1901, the Smithsonian Institution acquired 11 of the 200 portraits of Native Americans that then-president Theodore Roosevelt had commissioned from Sharp. Couse, too, enjoyed an award-winning national reputation for his dramatic yet peaceful moon-, sun-, and bonfire-lit depictions of both Pueblo and Plains Indians.

"Because of their appreciation for and sensitivity to the culture and lifestyle, they helped preserve what makes Taos unique," says Koenig. "In the Taos of a hundred years ago, you had to become part of the community, or you couldn't get stuff done. Everyone had to engage each other because they needed each other in this remote outpost of the American West. It's a different concept of community than we have today."



An unfinished E. Irving Couse painting occupies an easel in one corner of his studio.

JOSEPH HENRY SHARP (born in 1859, in Bridgeport, Ohio) turned his childhood hearing loss into an opportunity to hone his artistic skills. At age 14, he began studying art at the McMicken School of Design, in Cincinnati, and soon moved to Europe to continue his studies.

A gifted illustrator and painter, Sharp had a chance to deepen an early fascination with Indigenous culture when he visited Taos in 1893, on assignment to illustrate life at Taos Pueblo for *Harper's Weekly*. The town's charms, inspirational light, and access to unique subject matter became a frequent topic of conversation with Sharp's fellow painters in New York and Paris. One of those painters was Ernest Blumenschein, another TSA painter, who described Taos in a 1902 letter to Couse: "The great naked anatomy of a majestic landscape once tortured, now calm; the fitness of adobe houses to their tawny surroundings;

the vastness and overwhelming beauty of the skies; terrible drama of storms; peace of night—all in beauty of color, vigorous form, everchanging light."

Read more: From churches and chile to artisans and adventuring, the road from Santa Fe to Taos will elevate your mind, body, and spirit.

Accustomed to splitting time between New York, Washington State, and France, the Couses arrived in Taos that same year for their first summer in New Mexico. Born in Saginaw, Michigan, in 1866, Couse's interest in Native American culture developed first during his boyhood near the Chippewa band. Later he painted Yakima, Umatilla, and Klickitat Indians who lived near his wife Virginia's family ranch in Washington. Over his lifetime, he produced more than 1,500 oil paintings, primarily portraits of Indigenous residents of the western United States. The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway frequently commissioned his works for souvenir calendars and advertisements, bringing the Taos Society of Artists' depictions of Native life to audiences throughout the country.

Joseph Henry Sharp's studio, with a second-story loft, was renovated in 2017.

The Couse-Sharp connection deepened in 1909, when the Couses moved next door to the Sharps, who'd bought a house on Kit Carson Road a year earlier. Both men built studios on their properties. Photographs of Couse, Sharp, and the rest of the TSA are scattered around the historic site, showing a tight group of friends who often socialized. We can imagine them sharing a meal and discussing works in progress or the logistics of sharing models, including Ben Lujan and Jerry Mirabal from Taos Pueblo. In Sharp's words, they tried to depict each Native American subject as "a human being, endowed with intelligence, swayed by nobility of thought."

A buzz around their works attracted arts patrons such as Taos residents Mabel Dodge Luhan and Millicent Rogers. Other notable figures, including writer D.H. Lawrence, painter Georgia O'Keeffe, and photographer Ansel Adams, expanded the town's artistic and social scene. "The art world was very small back then," Koenig says. "They all knew each other and were influenced by each other, and by where they lived and worked."

The artists soon developed a tourist trade, creating pottery, jewelry, paintings, and depictions of high-desert vistas that served as mementos for travelers. The souvenir boom, in turn, inspired more creatives to come to Taos. "We're also interested in artists passing through New Mexico, whether Anglo, Native, Hispanic, or others," Koenig says.

A peek inside the new Lunder Research Center and its trove of research treasures.

THE ORIGINAL SHARP HOUSE NO LONGER EXISTS, but the painter's first workspace does: Luna Chapel. This Spanish adobe adjacent to the Couse house eventually became a vaulted storage area after Sharp built his second studio in 1915. It now serves as a compact venue for curated summer exhibitions from the site's collections.

Sharp's second studio began as a small dwelling that was enlarged with a second-story loft, north-facing windows, and lots of room for his extensive collection of Native outfits, artifacts, and props. Restored in 2017, the studio's focal point is the artist's easel and materials. Visitors are invited to interpret his life and work by viewing over 30 of his original artworks, along with letters and other memorabilia. Explaining his motivations, Sharp wrote, "In the past years I have seen many things and made studies that probably no other living artist ever saw ... if I do not paint them, no one ever will."

One of those paintings shows a Native man with two long braids, turquoise earrings, a red-collared overcoat, and a wide-brimmed hat. His downward gaze implies thoughtful contemplation. Hanging next to the portrait is the model's hat, connecting today's viewer with Sharp's signature rich tones and keen visual perception.

Read more: For a town with a population of just over 5,000 souls, Taos makes an outsize contribution to the character of New Mexico.

Let us count the ways.

In 1926, writer Fred Hamilton Rindge emphasized this painterly preoccupation in *The American Magazine of Art*: "They [the TSA] create priceless records of the Indian's past—a past which is all too readily lost in the onrush of our materialistic civilization. ... [The artists] are inevitably preserving for humanity the finest characteristics of the Pueblo Indian."

The Couses' house looks much as it did when the artist died, in 1936—family photographs are still displayed on the many fireplace mantles. Up until 2001, when the Couse Foundation was formed, the family took care of and lived on the property. (Even now, Virginia "Ginnie" Couse Leavitt, Couse's nonagenarian granddaughter and an art historian, resides in a small apartment there.)

"We keep everything as it was," Koenig says, "so visitors can be transported back in time, get a sense of what life was like, what the artists surrounded themselves with—the santos, the Spanish Colonial furniture. The site enables you to put the pieces together of what makes New Mexico wholly unique."

from left A room within the Couse house; The Couse studio was a gathering spot for Taos artists.

Filled with locally made furniture and household items brought from New York, Washington, and France, the Couses' comfortable residence includes abundant gardens and a sweeping view of the Taos Valley in the distance. Original paintings, many featuring Virginia Couse's distinctive profile, frame cabinets full of Blue Willow china; brass, copper, and pewter objects; and a collection of Spanish santos.

One small room is arranged as Couse's first studio: An easel and unfinished painting await his return, as do Pueblo pottery, beaded outfits, and other items used in his paintings. The adobe fireplace, along with a north-facing window, often served as a light source. Posing on a mobile platform, the artist's models would gaze at the Native pottery collection perched on shelves across the room. Couse developed his own reference photographs in the studio's darkroom.

It is easy to imagine the back-and-forth between the artists and their models, many of whom came from Taos Pueblo. “These artists couldn’t have done what they did without the cooperation of the Pueblo and the Hispano community, without building real relationships,” says Koenig. “These models were not passive sitters, but active agents of social change in shaping the works. We can see from candid photographs the relationships between artists and models. That tells you that this was the artist collaborating with them, not merely paying them by the hour.”

The painting palette and brushes of E. Irving Couse.

THE LUNDER RESEARCH CENTER, ALSO ON KIT Carson Road, incorporates parts of the Sharp home. Included in its collection are 181 works by Couse, 30 by Sharp, and a handful by other TSA artists, like Blumenschein, Oscar Berninghaus, Julius Rolshoven, Earnest Martin Hennings, and Victor Higgins.

Curators and archivists have decades of work ahead as they review more than 12,000 photographs, 10,000 negatives, 36 sketchbooks, and hundreds of pieces of original correspondence. Two thousand volumes in the library include a significant collection of rare books that belonged to Couse.

Until now, scholarship has focused on the individual artists and not their connection to the town, Koenig notes.

Bringing the TSA stories back to life includes making connections with today’s artists. The center’s Dean Porter Gallery schedules rotating exhibitions of work by artists living and working in northern New Mexico. In addition, the site will soon begin renovating a set of studios and apartments for visiting artists and scholars in residence, another expansion of its connection to the town and mission to foster an appreciation for the TSA legacy.

Koenig emphasizes the link between contemporary artists and the site that celebrates their forebears. “As one of the most significant places for artistic production in the country, Taos is a place where connections between all those artists were made,” he says. “We want to make those connections known.”

Read more: Equal parts showman and artist, Ed Sandoval conjures a timeless New Mexico.

BEYOND THE FRAMES

Some highlights of the Couse-Sharp Historic Site.

Rosie the Mobile Machine Shop
The Couses’ only child, Kibbey, was a mechanical genius who experimented in his chemistry laboratory, machine shop, and garage, adjacent to the house. This past summer, the site acquired Rosie, a 1942 Ford cab-over-engine vehicle that’s the last known Couse Mobile Machine Shop aviation model in North America. It’s one of more than 1,000 such vehicles used in World War II.

Secret Playhouse
A hidden adobe playhouse with a scaled-down door, picture window, and copper-clad slide entertained Couse’s grandchildren. A secret interior passage allowed entry to and from the main house.

Tepee & Little Egypt
The Sharp courtyard holds a full Plains Indian–style tepee, where the painters posed their subjects, and Little Egypt, an outhouse modeled after Egyptian burial tombs.

Poker Table
John Dunn, one of Taos’s most infamous citizens, owned a gambling hall, hotel, and transport service. Once a poker table in an unknown Dunn establishment, the crimson kitchen table hosted many neighborhood gatherings.

Virginia Couse experimented to see what would grow in her high-altitude yard.

THE MOTHER GARDEN OF TAOS

Taos blooms with the legacy of Virginia Walker Couse, though most do not realize the impact she made on its landscape—or even their own yards. From 1909, when she and her husband purchased a house on an uncultivated hillside, until her death, 20 years later, Virginia experimented with flowers, vines, and trees to see what would grow at 7,000 feet.

Friends sent her seeds and live plants, including the lush Virginia creeper vine that still climbs the garden's portal, providing shade in summer and a vivid crimson display in autumn. Couse and Ben Lujan (Taos Pueblo), her agricultural partner and her husband's favorite model, nurtured a wide lawn and encouraged both native and imported species. After she died, Lujan continued developing the garden.

Both made a practice of gifting the community with cuttings and seeds for their own gardens. Taos's abundance of phlox, hollyhocks, cosmos, and poppies today is credited in part to Couse and Lujan's work in improving soil, building stone terrace walls, and caring for plants. For more than a century, the Taos gardening community has shown up on the fall Saturday when the public is invited to collect inspiration and physical specimens from Couse's garden.

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