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Master American Printmaker Gene Kloss' Vision Of Taos

Gene Kloss was one of America's finest printmakers. A pair of exhibitions in Taos, NM share her perspectives from a 60-year career highlighting the landscapes, traditions, and Native people of northern New Mexico.

By **Chadd Scott**, Contributor. ⓘ Chadd Scott covers the...

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Gene Kloss, 'Christmas Eve at Taos Pueblo,' 1946, drypoint etching, 13 3/4 x 18 7/8 in. Gift of the Estate of Constantine Aiello. Harwood Museum of Art. HARWOOD MUSEUM OF ART.

Gene Kloss (1903–1996) was one of America's finest printmakers. Throughout a 60-year career highlighting the landscapes, traditions, and Native people of northern New Mexico, particularly Taos, Kloss continually innovated the medium. Dramatic contrasts of light and dark. A revelatory, hazy softness that made prints glow.

Gene Kloss, a master.

Gene Kloss, a woman.

The artist was born Alice Geneva Glasier. After marrying in 1925, she took her husband's last name and altered her middle name to replace the feminine Alice with gender-neutral Gene for professional reasons. Kloss sought a career as a professional artist and figured many collectors, galleries and museums would ignore the work of a woman out of hand.

Shrewd.

The name change worked. Gene Kloss received national and international recognition in her lifetime, extremely rare for a midcentury female artist.

“Gene” received prestigious exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, [the Smithsonian Institution](#), and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her prints belong to the collections of major institutions, including the Library of Congress, the Carnegie Institute, and the San Francisco Art Museum.

Would “Alice” have had the same success?

Impossible to say.

Kloss wasn’t the only midcentury female artist to break through. In 1938, her prints were exhibited in Paris alongside fellow New Mexican Georgia O’Keeffe. Still, examples of talented women overcoming gender biases in reaching the upper echelons of the 20th century fine art world are far less numerous than the other way around.

To this day, Kloss’ identity, while not a secret, remains mistakenly assumed by newcomers discovering her work and story. The truth of her work and story are revealed during “Legacy in Line: The Art of Gene Kloss” a collaborative effort from [the Couse-Sharp Historic Site](#) and [the Harwood Museum of Art](#), both in Taos, celebrating Kloss’ extraordinary career and contributions to American printmaking. The presentation opens on March 15 at the Harwood and March 18 at the Couse-Sharp Historic Site; both shows run through May 31, 2025.

A Vision Of Taos



Gene Kloss, 'Centuries Old,' 1979, etching, drypoint, and aquatint, 12 7/8 x 19 1/8 in. Anonymous Gift. Harwood Museum of Art.
HARWOOD MUSEUM OF ART.

Kloss was born in Oakland. She studied art and printmaking and showed outstanding early promise. Her first trip to Taos came in 1925 on her honeymoon. Her 60-pound etching press made the trip across the Southwest with her and her new husband. “I was a New Mexican from then on,” Kloss wrote later.

“What I love about Gene Kloss is that she captures the very spiritual nature—without getting woo, woo—the very spiritual nature of the landscape and the culture of northern New Mexico like few artists consistently have,” Davison Koenig, executive director and curator at Couse-Sharp Historic Site, told Forbes.com. “Her stark contrast, black and white, chiaroscuro style, so graphically powerful, and yet she's able to capture so well the dynamic skies and light of northern New Mexico. It almost seems unfathomable that you could do that with black and white. She really captures that power of both the weather and the storms and the clouds and the light, and this kind of spiritual other that resides in the landscapes and cultures of northern New Mexico.”

Much of that feel and spirit comes from the area's Indigenous inhabitants, Taos Pueblo and the surrounding Pueblos of northern New Mexico, where Native people and Native culture exist at least as prominently—arguably more prominently—than anywhere else in the continental United States.

Kloss' landscape prints deftly, insightfully capture the mountains and streams and gorges and cottonwood trees and snow and atmosphere of the terrain in and around Taos. Her depictions of the area's Indigenous people, their ceremonies and architecture go even further into the realm of sublime. Otherworldly. They take you there. To the Pueblo. To the dance. See the movement. Hear the chanting. Feel the drum.

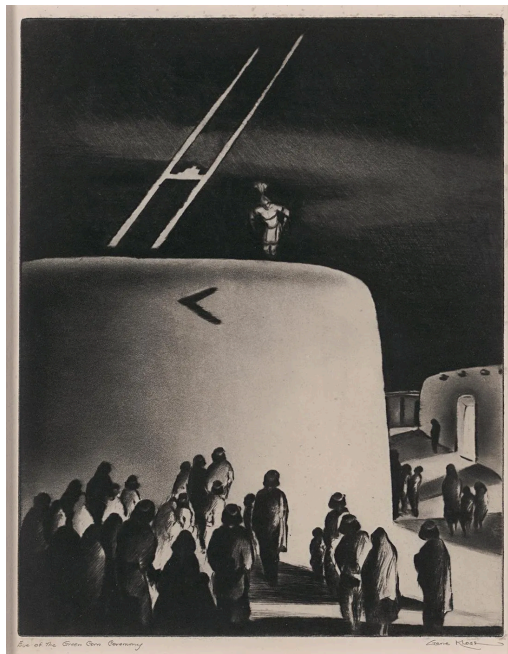
A tricky thing, white people depicting Native people in art. Kloss did so with an extreme degree of sensitivity, more documentary than self-promotional. The subject always came before the artist. She put her time in with the people and their practices. Nothing about the work hits as appropriation or exploitation.

Her prints of Native gatherings and ceremonies, and the landscapes for that matter, all result from first-hand observation and [her photographic memory](#). She made no on-site reference sketches or pictures, yet the prints of Indigenous subjects recall photography for their remarkable detail and accuracy. Kloss possessed a superhuman talent for observation.

“In some ways, I think that gave her a different perspective because she's completely translating (scenes) from her own emotions and memory, and nothing, of course, translates directly,” Koenig said. “It enabled her to translate (what she saw) into oftentimes more powerful imagery because she's drawing on emotion more than she is on the recorded, representative accuracy.”

Kloss and her husband eventually settled in Taos in 1945, routinely traveling back to the Bay Area to care for elderly parents.

‘There Is No Line’



Gene Kloss, 'Eve of the Green Corn Ceremony - Domingo Pueblo,' 1934, drypoint, aquatint, edition of 130 13 7/8 x 10 3/4 in. Couse-Sharp Historic Site, Gift of Joy and Frank Purcell. COUSE-SHARP HISTORIC SITE

Kloss paired her brilliant eye with an equally skilled hand and devotion to her medium. She did paint and make etchings, but it is printmaking for which she stands as an icon.

“Throughout her career, she was continually experimenting with especially print making capabilities and really pushing the boundaries of what you could do with different styles of printmaking,” Koenig explained. “She becomes a virtuoso and was recognized for her experimentation and the subtleties she's able to get by using powdered inks and dropping them onto the paper.”

These are the breakthroughs and achievements for which she's honored as the first woman admitted to the National Academy in 1950 by the National Academy of Design, the greatest honor afforded any artist of her generation.

Kloss' unusual use of powdered ink and how she applied it gave some of her prints a nearly ghostly, cloudy, almost spot-lit quality.

“That's largely a technique that she invented to get that softness, that quality, that is just hard to imagine being able to pull,” Koenig said. “When you think of etching with copper plates, it's such a hard material. How do you capture that ethereal softness when you're working with copper plates? It's mind boggling.”

Kloss took the fundamental tenet of printmaking, line, and subverted it, a fact the museum exhibitions play with.

“The title of the show is 'Legacy in Line,' and yet (she was quoted) saying, 'There is no line.' That's the mystique of Gene Kloss, she's working with lines, and yet she's able to produce pieces that you can't imagine a line,” Koenig said.

Kloss' quote was, "Etching is unique. It is a true abstraction. There is no real black or white in nature. There is no line. But in using those two extremes with all the values in between and a delineation of form in line, an essence of a subject is depicted as the actual form."

Most of the approximately 50 prints and watercolors showcased in the exhibitions were donated by Joy and Frank Purcell to the Taos community and both institutions. The Purcell's began collecting Kloss' artworks, then acquired a house in Taos, not knowing Kloss had previously owned it. This led to a lifelong friendship and exchange of letters.

Drawings, plates, correspondence and other archival materials relating to Kloss's career will additionally be on view in the shows.

"People are quick to dismiss print making as, 'Well, you know, it's not a fine art like painting,'" Koenig said. "Oh no, Gene Kloss is proof positive that print making is a very fine art. No two prints are exactly the same. She herself did every single one of her prints, and she was absolutely meticulous and obsessed with getting an ideal print every time."

If all of that fails to convert anyone into a Gene Kloss fan, lastly, there's this.

"She refused to increase her prices even though her demand and her career did amazing," Koenig explained. "She wanted her work to be affordable by everyone. When she was alive, her prices never largely increased that much. (She wanted) an average person (to be able) afford to buy amazing art. Now it's at the whims of capitalism and her stock has increased greatly in the last 10 years; enormously."

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By [Chadd Scott](#). Chadd Scott has been covering the intersection of art and travel at Forbes.com since 2018. He specializes in stories related to [Native American](#), [African American](#), and [female artists](#). An Auburn University journalism graduate, Scott has...

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