

CIRCLES OF SUPPORT: WOMEN AT WORK IN TAOS

In the process of curating this exhibition of artists from the Harwood Collection with my friend Judy Kendall, we unearthed surprising treasures, artworks we'd never seen. We found art by women with famous (in Taos!) last names – Blumenschein, Corbett, Ufer, Reed, Benrimo, Lawrence – and traditional clay and religious art made by unnamed pueblo and Hispanic women. With difficulty, we narrowed our choices down to work by 76 women who have made their art in Taos or were touched by Taos in some way.

The importance of community became clear to me as the stories of these artists intersected on many levels. At one point in our curatorial process Judy said, “Women create in community. Men create in isolation.”

Yes! Despite being a huge generality, this declaration is true here in Taos. Women artists do thrive in Taos due in part to the wealth of circles of female support.

It begins with dirt. The adobe surfaces of the homes in Taos are women's work. I learned this fact in my first year in Taos, 1973, when my husband and I moved into a 150-year-old adobe ruin in Talpa. The local high school boys we hired to re-mud the adobe walls taught us that. After their mud work fell off the walls as it dried, they ran home to fetch their mothers and grandma. These *enjarradoras* proceeded to fix the walls and build several exquisite and functional adobe fireplaces. At the pueblo, vessels made from micaceous clay mined locally is also women's work. The functional art forms and methods followed to create them, is shared within matriarchal family circles.

As with the functional work in clay and adobe, women's creative work in other mediums often went uncelebrated, unstudied in the early days of what's come to be known as the “Taos Art Colony.” Consider the Taos Society of Artists (1915-1927), a group that only admitted one female to the club in its twelve-year run, Catharine Critcher. Many of their wives and the mates of the later “Taos Moderns” excelled in art school yet never saw the financial or critical acclaim of their partners. These women artists of the pre-twentieth-century feminist movement era may have suffered more than other groups of strong Taos women due to their deference to supporting their creative spouses. Little has been documented as to how these women interacted: did they bond, compete, deny, or support one another? We chose art by a number of these women to exhibit in *Work By Women*.

In 1918, Mabel Dodge's salon brought D.H. and Frieda Lawrence to Taos and the ultimate girls' club, “The Three Muses” was born. D.H.'s women, Mabel, Frieda and Lady Dorothy Brett, along with Georgia O'Keeffe (unfortunately not yet in the Harwood Collection) and Rebecca James were focused on the dream of a new utopia

in the west. Their collective output has indeed impacted twentieth century art history. In 1954, Helene Wurlitzer created a quiet retreat for artists of any gender to spend time in Taos, to find inspiration in its land, culture, and its isolation from urban life. Agnes Martin was the first Wurlitzer resident! To date, the residency program has hosted more than 2,000 visual artists, writers and musicians. Some are in this exhibition. Many Wurlitzer residents have permanently relocated to Taos, proving that one woman's vision can change lives and a community.

In the 1960s, three east-coast-educated Anglo artists met in Taos and together revived the nearly lost tradition of Rio Grande weaving. While creating their own artwork in fiber they founded and nurtured wool cooperatives in Los Ojos, Arroyo Seco and Truchas, New Mexico. These women, Rachel Brown, Joan Loveless, and Kristina Wilson are related by marriage and their grandchildren continue the weaving traditions in this area.



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Small circles, as seen in the 20-year relationship between two landscape painters, Barbara Zaring and Alyce Frank, are common in Taos. Institutional circles such as UNM's printmaking program led by Jennifer Lynch and Amy Rankin have provided tools, know-how, camaraderie and critical feedback for several artists in this exhibition.



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Then there are the gallerists. Over the past one hundred years, a number of powerful women in Taos have helped artists economically by showing and selling their art. At the center of these stables were Helen Martin, founder of the historic Taos Inn, Eulalia Emetaz, Rena Rosequist, Cecilia Torres (mother of Mayé, an artist in this show), Trudy Valerio Healy and my co-curator Judy Kendall (Fenix Gallery, 1989 to 2009), to name a few.

The circles of Taos women today – artists, writers, educators, farmers, mothers – continue to have a connection to the earth and their communities. They are beacons in this politically dark time, practiced in re-mudding crumbling structures and in exposing the artifices of inequality. Taos women are a reminder that women's "weakness" is an illusion, an old story. This collection of work by Taos women artists reveals that story to have been a fiction all along.

– JANET WEBB, Guest Curator

Janet moved to Taos from New York over 40 years ago. She ran a design and marketing business, Webb Design Inc, that focused on print and internet solutions for travel destinations and businesses in the fine arts arena for 36 years. She is a member of the Harwood's Collections Committee.