

**Pursuit** *of*  
*Happiness*  
**GI Bill in TAOS**

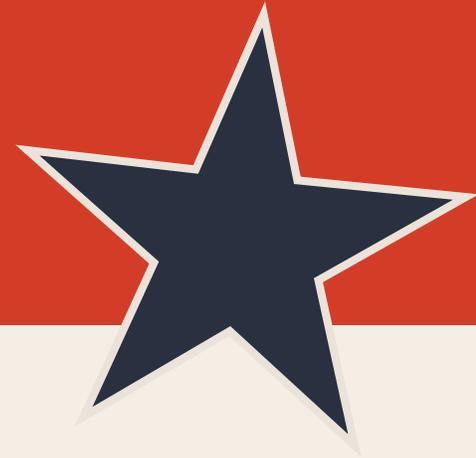
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27 SEP 2025 – 31 MAY 2026

*Presented by* HARWOOD MUSEUM OF ART

# *Pursuit of Happiness:* **GI BILL IN TAOS**

SEPTEMBER 27, 2025 – MARCH 31, 2026



**The G.I. Bill, officially the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, was a massive wave that swept through American society.**

Called “The Law that Changed America,” the GI Bill generation of artists expanded modernism through innovations to longstanding traditions of landscape, portraiture, still life, history painting, genre painting and sculpture. They became the first generation of American artists on the world stage. Democratization of the art world was simply carried along in its wake, in a country that had never cared much for fine art.

To appreciate the immense scope of the GI Bill’s influence, consider that 80% of the men born in the US between 1920 and 1927 were World War II military veterans.<sup>1</sup> Before WWII, only 24% of Americans graduated from high school, and 80% never travelled farther than 200 miles from their birthplace.<sup>2</sup> It was the first time they really saw each other and their nation’s diversity. Rural Protestant farm boys met big city Jewish recruits. They travelled not only the length and breadth of their country, but they also went places they had never even heard of worldwide.

The US government was worried what might happen if millions of veterans were dumped into the economy. It was the first government in the world to offer multi-faceted and comprehensive support, providing education

benefits (Title II), loans for homes and businesses (Title III), unemployment insurance (Title IV), and readjustment allowances (Title V). Unlike the Depression era WPA/FAP assignments, the GI Bill recipients chose what to study, where to study and when to study. Never had so much been available to so many. To everyone’s surprise, nearly eight million of the sixteen million who qualified for the GI Bill used the educational benefits. Instead of returning home to work on farms, at gas stations, or as wedding photographers, GIs became veterinarians, engineers, lawyers, journalists, and artists. At the time, American artists were still considered fringe figures, effete and impractical. Taos was an exception, a place where artists were valued members of the community. The GI Bill made possible their postwar geographic, social, and economic mobility.

Many veterans used the GI Bill at multiple institutions throughout the country, Europe and Mexico. They arrived in Taos from across the nation and abroad to study at Emil Bisttram’s atelier School of Fine Art and the Mandelman-Ribak Taos Valley Art School. From New York, they brought Abstract Expressionism, some under the tutelage of Hans Hoffman or studying at the

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Art Students League. GI Bill postwar artists who became internationally acclaimed like John Chamberlain and Richard Diebenkorn, never worked in isolation. Their student communities were essential seedbeds for pivotal innovations and a matrix of lifelong connections. This exhibition features art by GI Bill students, classmates, instructors, short and long-term Taos residents, and prominent visitors. Their work demonstrates the astonishing influence of gestural abstraction that flourished at the California School of Fine Arts, the geometry of Josef Albers at Black Mountain College, the enduring lure of Paris, and the strength of Native cultural ties.

Compared to their coastal, big city counterparts, GI Bill-affiliated artists in Taos were more susceptible to landscape and less attached to surrealism, figuration, Pop, and conceptual styles. Since the Taos Society of Artists put Taos on the map in the early 20th century, Taos has benefited from its geography. It has been a consequential place of connection for artists from both coasts and Europe, a commodious and stunningly beautiful place to live.

*The Pursuit of Happiness* exhibition presents artists grouped by school communities features **four artists**. After the GI Bill expired in 1956, there were also several artists who visited or came to live in Taos, some temporarily, others permanently.



*Students at the University of New Mexico's Taos Field School of Art, c. 1948, photographic print. Harwood Museum of Art Archives.*

### **University of New Mexico Summer Field School of Art, 1929-1956**

Beginning in 1929, UNM's Summer Field School of Art was based at the Harwood Museum of Art. Established even before Lucy Harwood officially gifted the museum to the university in 1935, students attended classes and were housed at the Harwood. GI Bill students enrolled at the Field School included Malcolm Brown and R.C. Ellis. They studied alongside Agnes Martin, who was envious of their veteran's education benefits.

## The Bisttram Taos School of Fine Art 1932 – c. 1962

In 1932, Hungarian-born Emil Bisttram was the first modernist to set up a summer school in Taos. His teaching was rooted in the principles of European modernism and Dynamic Symmetry, extending the tradition of Wassily Kandinsky's *Spiritual in Art*. Bisttram co-founded the Transcendental Painting Group in 1938, an association oriented to international abstraction, whose activities were curtailed by WWII. During the war, from 1941 until 1945, Bisttram gave art classes in Phoenix. Following the war, his Taos atelier garnered GI Bill certification, and he added winter sessions in Los Angeles from 1945 until 1951. LA native Cliff Harmon used his GI Bill to study at three schools – in 1946 at Bisttram's Los Angeles branch, in 1948 at the Taos Valley Art School, and in 1949 at Black Mountain College.

Janet Lippincott arrived in Taos for Bisttram's 1949 summer session. This experience underpinned her transition from East Coast high society to an adventuresome, self-supporting, independent artist. A former Women's Army Corps member (WAC) and



*Janet Lippincott with her stepmother on her debarkation in New York City, September 14, 1945. Photo: New York Daily News. Courtesy of Tim Owen, Owen Gallery, Santa Fe.*

Dwight Eisenhower's assistant, she was the only woman among Bisttram's six GI Bill students that summer. When she finished a painting and turned her canvases upside down to test their structure, Bisttram told her she was wasting his time.

It took decades, but he recanted for a 1972 Lippincott exhibition: "To write this is both an honor and a privilege. Her paintings are always well-organized and constructed; her color rich and powerful, yet sensitive and with a subtle beauty that is refreshing."<sup>3</sup> Lippincott's vivid abstractions moved Southwest regional art beyond romanticism and classic modernism toward experimentation. She contributed substantially to the region as an inspiring example to an untold number of younger women artists.

## Mandelman-Ribak Taos Valley Art School, 1947-1953

Transplanted New York modernists Louis Ribak and Beatrice Mandelman married in 1944, the same year they moved to Taos. In 1947, they established their Taos Valley Art School (TVAS) to take advantage of the GI Bill accreditation. By far the most active GI Bill school in Taos, the TVAS was a year-round program, averaging twenty students per semester. Serving veterans from across the US, their students included Louis Catusco, John DePuy, Ted Egri, Leo Garel, Herman Rednick, and Charles Stewart. Many were from Taos Pueblo, including Alex Concha and Eva Mirabal.

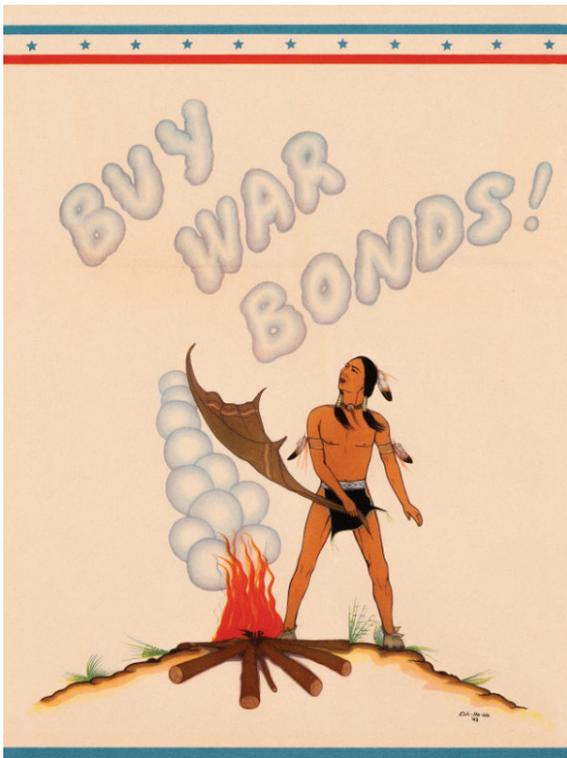
As a youth, Mirabal attended the Santa Fe Indian boarding school in Santa Fe, where she studied in Dorothy Dunn's legendary painting program. She enlisted in the army in 1943, and her full-time assignment was painting several murals at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio. She also created a cartoon titled *G.I. Gertie*, about a WAC who undermines military protocol. After her discharge in 1946, Mirabal



taught for a year at Southern Illinois Normal University and then returned to Taos Pueblo. While nursing her elderly mother, she attended TVAS from 1949-51.

New Yorker Louis Catusco specifically came to Taos in 1951 to study with Louis Ribak. A graduate of Boys High School in Brooklyn who served in the US Navy as a sonarman, he initially used his GI Bill at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (1947-48). After a frustrating decade in New York trying to find a foothold in the crowded field of Abstract Expressionist artists, Catusco returned to Taos permanently in 1961. Admired for his innovative, sophisticated, and experimental abstractions, he became progressively more reclusive and was known in Taos as a “hermit-prophet of the last word in the avant-garde.”<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, an FBI informant named Harvey Matt, aka Harvey Matsuow, enrolled in TVAS for the 1949 summer session, and after he denounced Ribak as a communist, the school lost its GI Bill certification.<sup>5</sup>



### **Black Mountain College Comes to Taos, 1933-1957**

The most legendary school associated with GI Bill art students, Black Mountain College (BMC) was kept afloat by the influx of veterans. A utopian project founded in 1933; BMC was a small, scrappy, financially strapped, liberal arts school in the “middle-of-nowhere” rural North Carolina. Its posthumous reputation has reached stratospheric, mythological proportions. The school’s freewheeling, collaborative, cross-pollination was crucial to the likes of John Chamberlain.

Former Bauhaus instructors Josef Albers and his wife Anni were the stabilizing and disciplined guides for BMC’s hands-on, materials approach to education. Arriving in 1933 and staying for sixteen years, Josef was a foundational influence for GI Bill students Oli Sihvonen who enrolled in 1946, and Cliff Harmon in 1951. Chamberlain – one of the youngest veterans – did not arrive until summer of 1955 during BMC’s final chapter, when poetry was the primary focus. Besides Cliff and Betty Harmon, Sihvonen and his wife, weaver Joan Loveless (who met at BMC), Taos became home for such alumni as artist Jorge Fick, poet/ceramicist Cynthia Homire, and gallerist Rena Rosequist.

*Top to Bottom: Eva Mirabal drawing her first G.I. Gertie cartoon. Photo by AAF Service Command. Published in New Mexico Magazine (July 1944). Coming/Gomez Collection. • Eva Mirabal [Eah-Ha-Wa], (1920–1968), Buy War Bonds, 1942. Offset poster 19 3/4 x 16 1/8 inches (cm) Earl Jones Jr. Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma, Norman. The James T. Bialac Native American Collection. In her final year at the Santa Fe Indian School, Mirabal’s poster won a contest by the US Treasury Department to encourage the purchase of war bonds.*

A child of Finnish immigrants raised in Norwich, Connecticut, Oli Sihvonen enrolled at BMC immediately after the war along with his two sisters – Eini and Miriam (known as “Mim”), who served as a nurse in WWII. Before the war, Oli attended the Arts Students League in New York City (1938-1941). A sergeant in the US Army’s 603rd Camouflage Battalion, known as the Ghost Army, they landed in Normandy with Allied troops and conducted missions of deception on the western front. This little-known special unit of artists, designers, and sound engineers conducted twenty-one missions – eleven under fire – using 10,000 blow-up dummy tanks and heavy artillery, mobile loudspeakers, officer impersonations, and rumors.

### **California School of Fine Arts Circle of Artists**

Before WWII, the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA) in San Francisco was a sleepy school for genteel young women. Completely revamped in 1945 by Douglas MacAgy, the student body tripled in size by 1946, and three-quarters were returning veterans on the GI Bill. Under MacAgy’s dynamic leadership, the school became a leading experimental campus, the West Coast equivalent of Black Mountain College. Under the spell of Clyfford Still, studios were open twenty-four hours a day and there was a resident jazz band. Faculty and GI Bill students operated as colleagues, and after only one semester as a student, Richard Diebenkorn was hired as faculty.

Following the departure of Still and MacAgy in 1950, the school quickly devolved, and Taos became a destination for several main innovators, including former faculty Ed Corbett and Clay Spohn. Diebenkorn used the remainder of his GI Bill funding to enter UNM’s Master of Art program in Albuquerque and on numerous occasions, he visited his CSFA friends in Taos. Diebenkorn’s New Mexico work was even included in a group show at La Gallery Escondida. Founded by Eulalia Emetaz,



*Oli Sihvonen and Miriam (Mim) Sihvonen, Paris, 1945, photograph. Courtesy of Jennifer Sihvonen*

who was also a veteran, hers was one of the first Taos galleries to feature postwar art.

In 1951, while driving back to Manhattan after teaching a CSFA summer session, New York-based GI Bill artist Ad Reinhardt visited Taos to see his friend Louis Ribak. His notes in the Archives of American Art read: “Argue with John Sloan over Jackson Pollock in Louis Ribak’s studio in Taos.”<sup>6</sup>

In later years, students Lawrence Calcagno and Lily Fenichel made Taos home for extended periods.

### **Soldiers to Citizens – GI Bill Artists Settle in Taos and Visit**

Incomplete information raises intriguing questions about the connections between this generation in Taos. Before the war, Midwesterner Keith Crown studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and following the war was a tenured professor at the University of Southern California from 1946 until 1983. Robert Ray first used his GI Bill at USC in 1950 and then moved to Taos in 1954. Crown first visited Taos in 1956 while on sabbatical and moved here after his retirement. Was Ray his link to Taos?

## Diebenkorn's New Mexico work was even included in a group show at La Gallery Escondida. Founded by Eulalia Emetaz, who was also a veteran, hers was one of the first Taos galleries to feature postwar art.

Likewise, did Robert M. Ellis study with Crown? After Ellis used his GI Bill in Mexico City, he completed an MA at USC in 1952. Ellis is, of course, well known to the Harwood community as the former director who expanded and professionalized the museum by shepherding Agnes Martin's major donation, the addition of the Mandelman-Ribak Gallery and such necessities as dedicated parking.

Two Taos-affiliated artists – Lawrence Calcagno and Wolcott Ely – used their GI Bill to also study in Paris, the international city of arts and letters that belonged to the world. After three years at CSFA, Calcagno used his fourth and final year of the GI Bill at Académie de la Grande Chaumière. It is unknown where Ely was enrolled, but Taoseños came to know Georgette Delenue whom he met and married in France. The couple settled in Taos in 1954. Paris was also the place African American painter Ed Clark studied and found his mature style. Clark's association with Taos is a mystery.

He was known to have visited in 1981 or 1982, after which he produced the impressive *Taos Series* in his signature style of grand, sweeping swathes of paint. Who did he know in Taos? Why did he visit?

The art of this generation changed the history of art. US industrial might and geopolitical power was matched by American artists stepping onto the world stage. GI Bill artists eclipsed imported styles and embedded European traditions.

— **MaLin Wilson-Powell, Guest Curator**

“the war ... deeply rearranged values. The prewar sense of orderliness or properness (of life) ... was outmoded. If you have the world blow up in your face, you're bound to change your mind.” – Edward Corbett

<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Mettler, endnote #28, *Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005): 7.

<sup>2</sup> Demographic information re 1940 census data on distance from US birthplace to current location.

<sup>3</sup> Lippincott quoted in Shari Morrison, “Interview: A Lifetime of Determination,” *Art-Talk* (November 2002): 14.

<sup>4</sup> Jim Parsons and Philip Bareiss quoted in <https://www.bostonartclub.com/louis-catusco-bio>

<sup>5</sup> Lois P. Rudnick with Jonathan Warm Day Coming, *Eva Mirabal: Three Generations of Tradition and Modernity at Taos Pueblo* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2021): 88.

<sup>6</sup> Ad Reinhardt, Oral history interview with Harlan Phillips, c.1964. Washington, DC: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution: [https://www.aaa.si.edu/download\\_pdf\\_transcript/ajax?record\\_id=edanmdm-AAADCD\\_oh\\_213746](https://www.aaa.si.edu/download_pdf_transcript/ajax?record_id=edanmdm-AAADCD_oh_213746)



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## The art of this generation changed the history of art.

*Presented by* HARWOOD MUSEUM OF ART

Curated by MaLin Wilson-Powell, Guest Curator

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