

## **The Taos School**

Taos was New Mexico's premier art colony and the first significant art colony in the American West. Ernest Blumenschein and Bert Phillips were among the founding artists in 1898. The exotic mix of Pueblo Indian and Hispanic cultures, along with the dramatic beauty of the dessert and mountain geography soon attracted a large group of dedicated artists, many of whom were academically trained in schools across the United States and in Paris. The first generation of artists working in Taos is considered to extend from 1885 to 1915 and includes Oscar Berninghaus, E. Irving Couse, Buck Dunton, Victor Higgins, Walter Ufer, Julius Rolshoven and E. Martin Hennings. Many of these men knew each other from their association with the Art Institute of Chicago and were sponsored by Carter Harrison, the mayor of Chicago, who, in turn, wanted paintings of Southwest subject matter.

The works these artists produced reflected the conservative, realist styles they had been taught at the academies. In 1915, six of them formed a group called The Taos Society of Artists whose purpose was to have strength in numbers to market their paintings in the East. Over the next dozen years, the organization added more members and became one of the best known and most colorful art colonies in America. The artists benefited from the growing tourism industry in the Southwest; their chief sponsor was the Santa Fe Railroad, whose officials purchased many of the paintings and used reproductions on promotional pieces to lure travelers to the West by railway.

Although the stylistic distinctions between them and the earlier group are blurred, the second generation of arriving artists in Taos is often described as being more modernist in style, many of them having been influenced by impressionism and other movements originating in Europe. This second generation included Georgia O'Keefe, Andrew Dasaburg, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, John Sloan and Robert Henri. A key figure in bringing this second group of artists to Taos was Mabel Dodge, a wealthy socialite from New York, who settled in the village, married a Pueblo Indian, and hosted many prominent artists from the East.

The popularity of the Taos artist colony waned when the economic effects of World War II disrupted the tourist trade and diverted the resources of the Santa Fe Railroad. However, the spirit of the colony has lived on in artists who continue to capture on canvas the unique beauty and enduring spirit of the American Southwest.