

A Place In The Sun

The Southwest Paintings Of Walter Ufer And E. Martin Hennings



By James D. Balestrieri

DENVER, COLO. — If you think of Taos, N.M. — its mountains, trees, plants and flowers, its rivers, animals, dwellings, buildings, vehicles, its people — as a weaving loom (not a bad metaphor, with a nod to the incredible weaving tradition of the Pueblo peoples of the American Southwest), you can begin to organize and compare the works of Walter Ufer (1876–1936) and Ernest Martin Hennings (1886–1956), the two members of the Taos Society of Artists who are featured in “A Place in the Sun: The Southwest Paintings of Walter Ufer and E. Martin Hennings” at the Denver Art Museum through April 24 and traveling to the Philbrook Museum in Oklahoma May 29–August 28.

Cover Page: “Passing By” by E. Martin Hennings, circa 1924, oil on canvas, 44 by 49 inches. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.



“Their Audience” by Walter Ufer, 1919, oil on canvas, 40 by 50 inches. Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame.



"Announcements" by Martin Hennings, circa 1924, oil on canvas, 43½ by 45 inches. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

For Hennings, the Taos Indians are the shuttle, moving through the warp, as if their movement somehow creates the tapestries he paints: the soft light, dramatic, billowing clouds and beautiful stands of aspen glowing golden in autumn. For Ufer, the Indians are the weft; this is their land by virtue of what they have put into it. They have woven themselves into the landscape. They work it, even as it shapes them.

Where the two painters overlap is in the sense of belonging that each conveys in his painting. The subjects in a Hennings painting are clearly of Taos, in Taos, part of Taos, while the subjects in an Ufer painting are Taos. When you look at a Hennings painting, you find the people in the landscape; when you look at an Ufer, you find the landscape in the people.

Taos links Hennings and Ufer. Why? What was it that drew them and so many other artists, writers, composers and aesthetes of all stripes to this remote village in northern New Mexico? What is it that draws artists to Taos to this day?

The origins of the Taos Society lie behind a thin, romantic veil of myth. As the story goes, in 1898 painters Ernest Blumenschein and Bert Phillips were on a covered wagon adventure from Denver to Mexico, searching for an authentic America to paint. Their wagon broke down, as it happened, in Taos, and the beauties of the place struck them. But, as James Moore states in his catalog essay, "That Man Out There in the Mountains: Ufer, Hennings and the Conflicted Allure of Taos," the manner in which Blumenschein and Phillips "discovered" Taos conceals the fact that two different railroad lines would have gotten them there without the need for a wainwright in the wilderness.



**"Me and Him" by Walter Ufer, 1918, oil on canvas,
40 by 36 inches. Private collection.**



**"Going East" by Walter Ufer, 1917, oil on canvas; 51 by 51 inches.
The Eugene B. Adkins Collection at Philbrook Museum of Art and
the Fred Jones Jr Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma, Norman.**

In fact, as Moore writes, Taos "had reasonable access to rail transportation. The town, while appearing primitive in some ways, provided all necessary amenities. They lived in relative comfort in a place where living expenses were cheap because of the general poverty of the region. Taos's artistic advantages were its setting in a dramatic, ever-changing landscape and its proximity to an Indian pueblo in which some residents were open to outsiders."

In fact, Taos had been an important trading stop on the trail from Colorado to northern Mexico for centuries. And, as for artists "discovering" Taos, Peter Moran — brother of Thomas — had painted there in the late 1860s, and Joseph Sharp, who would become one of the original Taos Society members, first visited and painted there in 1893.

Taos had a certain charm for wealthy Easterners and Midwesterners who traveled there. Over the next few years, in Chicago and Cincinnati, in the art academies in New York, Munich and Paris, a group of American artists discussed the promise of this “primitive place, a holdover of the Wild West, and a place where people could still see Indians in an ‘unspoiled’ condition,” writes Moore. Meanwhile, men like Chicago Mayor Carter Harrison and industrialist Oscar Mayer saw the artistic potential in Taos and began to provide support – and exhibition opportunities – to artists who would venture there...

(Continued on page 8C inside the E-Edition)

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***"The Rendezvous" by E. Martin Hennings, circa 1925,
oil on canvas, 30 by 30 inches. Denver Art Museum.***

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