

Mabel Dodge Luhan & Company

American Moderns And The West



“Mabel Dodge Luhan, Frieda Lawrence and Dorothy Brett at Mrs Lawrence’s Porch, Near Taos” by Cady Wells, circa 1938. Photograph. Mabel Dodge Luhan Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

By James D. Balestrieri

TAOS, N.M. — When we think of Taos and its crucial place in American art of the Twentieth Century, we generally think of the Taos Society of Artists and the Taos Founders — Higgins, Blumenschein, Phillips, Couse, Ufer, Hennings, et al — and how they arrived in this remote village in northern New Mexico via the academies of Europe and the salons of Chicago and Cincinnati to “discover” an unspoiled land and its people.

The history of the Taos Society, until Catharine Critcher (1868–1964) is admitted just as it disbands, is an exclusively male tale. It is a story that touches on the Modernist movement, especially in the works of Higgins and Blumenschein, but does not delve into the influence

“Taos Indian Woman Plasterer” by Emil Bisttram, undated. Oil on canvas, 50 by 35 inches. Collection of Robert and Sherry Parsons, Taos, N.M.





of indigenous cultures on American Modernism, nor on American Modernism's influence on Pueblo and Hispano people. Perhaps most crucially, it is a tale without Mabel Dodge Luhan (1879–1962), which means it is not much of a tale at all.

On view at Taos's Harwood Museum of Art through September 11, and traveling subsequently to institutions in Albuquerque, N.M., and Buffalo, N.Y., "Mabel Dodge Luhan & Company: American Moderns and The West" showcases Luhan's role in shaping the culture of Taos, and, by extension, American art in the early Twentieth Century.

Mabel Dodge Luhan was a lonely little rich girl. The ardent desire to remake the world that would become

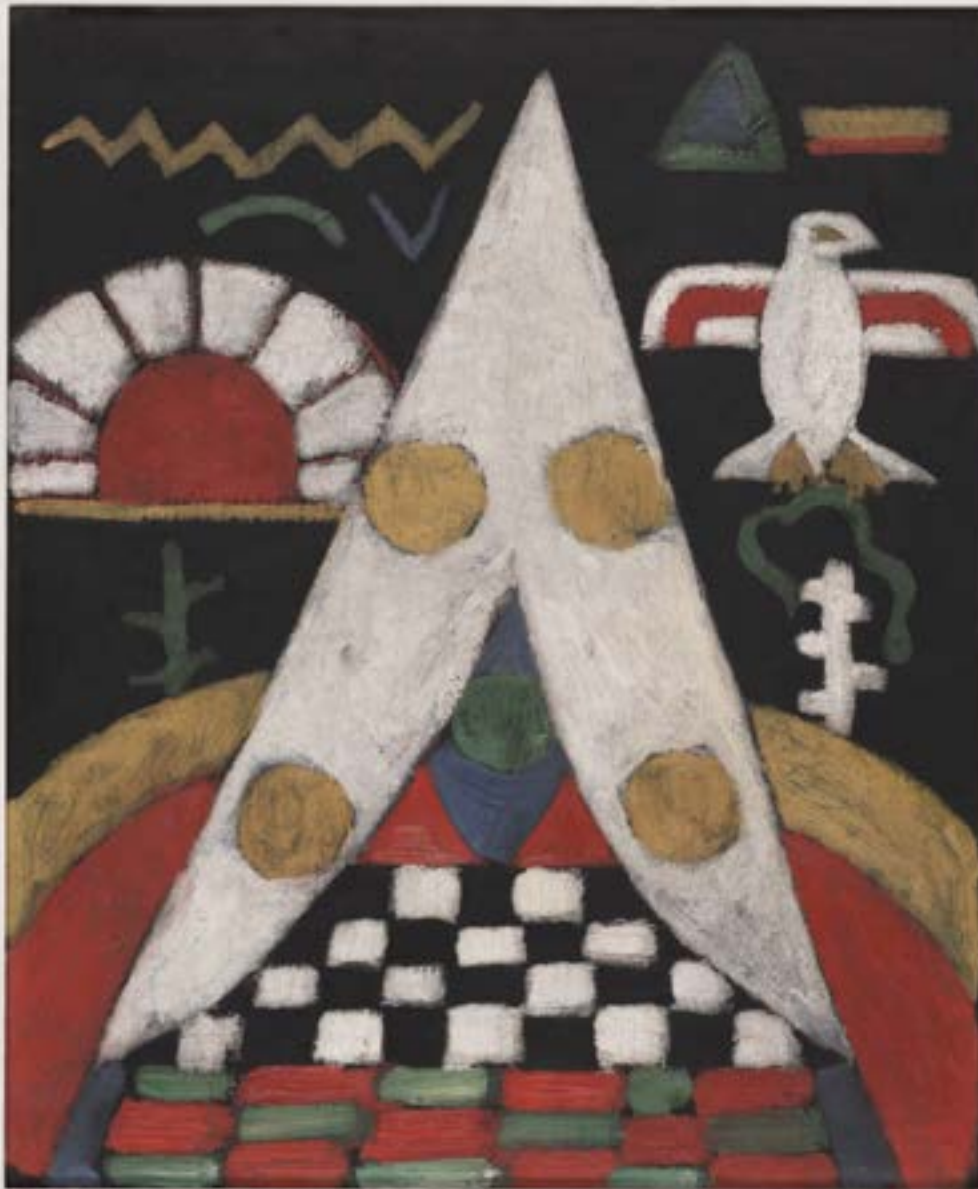
Mabel and Tony Lujan, circa 1920s. Mary Austin Collection. Photo courtesy Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens.

her passion stemmed, perhaps, from the fact that she was born into the stiffness of high society in Buffalo, then a burgeoning industrial capital. All but ignored by her parents, sent to school abroad, Luhan discovered at an early age that the friends she made as a result of mutual interests and intellectual curiosity were far more lasting than ties based on blood and breeding.

In Italy she attempted to recreate the Renaissance in Florence, sponsoring artists and hosting salons of interesting people, inspiring them to express themselves and let their ideas clash and complement one another. In Paris, Luhan soaked up the salons hosted by Gertrude Stein, bringing their ferment to bohemian Greenwich Village just in time for the Armory Show of 1913. When the outbreak of World



“Feather Dance” by Dorothy Brett, undated. Oil on canvas, 50 by 36 inches. Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin



War I dampened the Euro American cross-pollination of artistic approaches, Luhan decamped briefly for Croton-On-Hudson, N.Y. In 1918 she settled permanently in Taos, where she made her greatest contribution...

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“An Abstract Arrangement of Indian Symbols” by Marsden Hartley, circa 1914-15. Oil on canvas, 20¾ by 17½ inches. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

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