

The Broken Wheel and the Taos Society of Artists

(Ernest L. Blumenschein Home & Museum Brochure 2016)

American artist Joseph Henry Sharp briefly visited Taos in 1893. While studying painting in Paris two years later, he met and became friends with two other young American art students, Ernest L. Blumenschein and Bert G. Phillips. Sharp told them about the Indian village of Taos and the spectacular land. Blumenschein later wrote "I remember being impressed as I pigeon-holed that curious name in my memory with hope that some day I might pass that way."

On his return from Paris in 1896, Blumenschein was commissioned by McClures Magazine to do a series of illustrations in Arizona and New Mexico. He was so taken by the Southwest that he convinced his friend Bert Phillips to join him two years later on a sketching trip from Denver to Mexico. Having spent the summer of 1898 painting and camping in the Rocky Mountains, the two young artists started painting their way south in the early fall. On September 3, while driving the storm-ravaged roads of northern New Mexico, the wheel on their light surrey slipped onto a deep rut and broke. The men tossed a three-dollar gold piece to determine who would carry the wheel to the nearest blacksmith for repair. Blumenschein lost the toss and so made the twenty-mile trek to Taos with the broken wheel. Thus began a great experiment in American Art.

Blumenschein (called "Blumy" by his many friends) stayed in Taos only a few months and then returned to New York. Phillips, however, made Taos his home from that time forward. Blumenschein and Phillips spread word about the incredible beauty of Taos and urged other artists to come and see for themselves. Shortly thereafter, many artists came and saw. Some of them came and stayed. Blumenschein returned to Taos often over the next two decades for short periods of sketching and painting when he was not studying and working in Paris. In 1903, while living in Paris, Ernest met and fell in love with American artist, Mary Shepard Greene. Mary had lived in France since 1886 where she had become a well-recognized artist, winning medals in the famous Paris Salon d'Automne in 1900 and 1902. Mary was the second American and woman ever to win such an honor. Mary Cassatt was the first.

In June of 1905, Mary and Ernest were married in the Latin Quarter of Paris. They made their home in Paris where they also shared a studio. They supported themselves through illustration commissions for American magazines, many of which were collaborations with Ernest painting the men and Mary the women.

On Christmas day, 1906, Mary gave birth to Ethan Allen Blumenschein. Unfortunately, the infant son died two days later. In the early winter of 1909, Mary and Ernest returned to New York for the birth of their daughter Helen. Ernest convinced Mary to visit Taos for the first time in 1913. This visit with four year old Helen was a disaster. A diphtheria epidemic raged due to contaminated water and there was a lack of fresh fruit and vegetables. Mary fled Taos for the civilization of New York City and not until 1919 was Ernest able to finally persuade her to move to Taos permanently.

In July of 1915, Joseph Sharp, Blumenschein, Phillips and fellow artists Oscar E. Berninghaus, E. Irving Couse and W. Herbert "Buck" Dunton created the Taos Society of Artists to promote the artists work through annually organized, traveling exhibitions to several major American cities. These exhibitions brought considerable attention to both the artists and Taos, resulting in ever greater numbers of artists coming here and wishing to participate in the Society. The Society which grew to include twenty-one members and associate members was active until March, 1927, when it was disbanded. Art historian, Dr. Robert White, notes "It seems that for most members, the society had outlived its usefulness and maintaining it had become a burden." However by that time, Taos had become known as a significant American art colony.

In 1919, Ernest and Mary bought four rooms on Ledoux Street from a fellow member of the Taos Society of Artists, W. Herbert "Buck" Dunton. Between 1919 and 1931 the Blumenschein acquired several of the adjoining rooms and remodeled and adapted the home to its present layout. Today, the entire home is furnished with the Blumenscheins' original belongings. Rooms were arranged by Helen to be much as they had been when the family was living there,

Some of the paintings by members of the Taos Society of Artists and later artists were donated to the museum by members of the community as a tribute to the early years of the art colony.

Mary Shepard Greene Blumenschein

Mary Shepard Greene Blumenschein was an American artist in her own right. Her studies abroad led to her recognition as a painter. She won the Third Class Medal in 1900 at the Salon d'Automne. In 1902, she won a Gold Medal at the Salon.

After Mary settled into a life with Ernest in Taos, her painting career was eclipsed by her husband's artistic pursuits. After 1922, Mary turned to jewelry design and utilized the room that is now our bookstore as her jewelry shop.

Daughter Helen Greene Blumenschein also studied art in Paris accompanied by Mary. She explained that she did not want to learn art exclusively from her parents.