

# WESTWARD HO!

Taos continues to feed the creative spirit, beckoning artists and art lovers alike

BY AMY ECKERT



"Odyssey," an oil on panel, was painted by long-time Taos artist Randall LaGro.

Opposite, a traditional dancer at the annual Taos Pueblo Pow Wow, which marked its 19th year in July in the homelands of the Red Willow People. The dancing and singing competition and festival was canceled in 2003 by the Encebedo forest fire.

The story goes that a fortuitous accident in the autumn of 1898 put Taos on the artistic map. But what's keeping it on the map these days is definitely not a matter of chance.

Of its 6,000 full-time residents, scores of artists call Taos home—more per capita than Paris is the local claim. There are about 80 fine arts and craft galleries, some of them in business for decades. Taos has four art museums and numerous art fairs and festivals, including the Taos Fall Arts Festival, in its 30th year (Sept. 24–Oct. 11).

Seated on the high-desert mesa at the foot of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, Taos is a place where artists experiment with the new while respecting traditions. Some of those traditions do indeed date to that "fortuitous accident" when Ernest Blumenschein and Bert Geer Phillips, two young American painters who had recently studied in Paris, were on a sketching trip from Denver to northern Mexico. A broken wheel that took a while to repair gave them time to become captivated by the inimitable scenery and Native cultures of the Taos Valley. They took up residence, soon inviting other artists to experience firsthand the unique light, color and spiritual essence that permeated the place.

The rest, as they say, is history.

"Artists came in search of a unique American subject matter," notes David L. Witt, curator of the Harwood Museum, founded in 1923

and the second oldest museum in the state. "It really kicked off a new artistic movement."

Works by those early artists—including Blumenschein, Phillips, Joseph Henry Sharp, Oscar Berninghaus, E. Irving Couse and Herbert Dunton—and subsequent additions to the group they founded, the Taos Society of Artists, take center stage in the galleries of the Harwood. So do the works of the Taos Moderns and retablos and other objects and sculptures in the Hispanic tradition. At the Harwood, the emphasis is on locally created artworks.

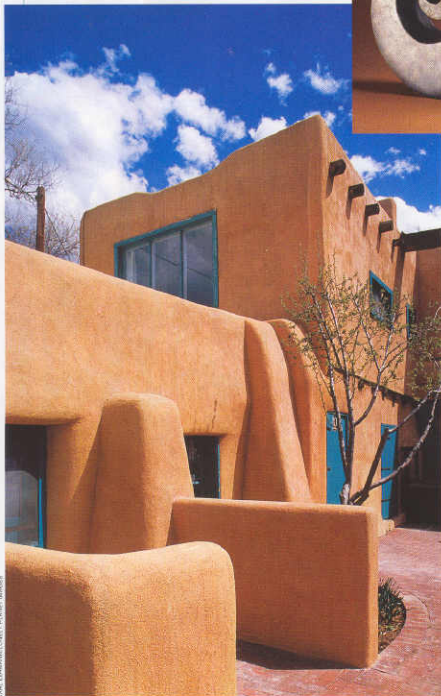
**T**he challenge, of course, has been to mentor a new generation of Taos artists who have the desire to create in those giants' footsteps while searching for a new path. That can be a formidable task in a region so closely associated with recognizable—some might say prescribed—Southwestern themes.

"The way I put it is, we have to make a break from pueblos and hollyhocks," says Randall LaGro, a painter and 15-year resident of Taos whose work was exhibited at Blue Rain Gallery's new Santa Fe location in July. "We really have to encourage new sensibilities."

LaGro struggled with his own artistic bent in his early days in town, eschewing paintings of Native Americans on horseback or quaint New Mexican farming villages. "I never felt like I fit into the Southwest scene. I was doing something else—monotypes and monochro-



PHOTO: DAVID J. COOPER/PHOTO COMMUNITARIAN



The Harwood Museum of Art is an early example of Pueblo Revival architecture. In 1997, the museum underwent a \$1.5 million renovation, expanding from two to seven galleries. At top is "Element II," a limited-edition bronze by Tammy Garcia.



matic works that had a classical feel but with a strange psychology underneath. But Taos worked as a place to develop because there's such a large community of artists here. There were always those among my peers who really encouraged me to take my time, to be patient and to explore."

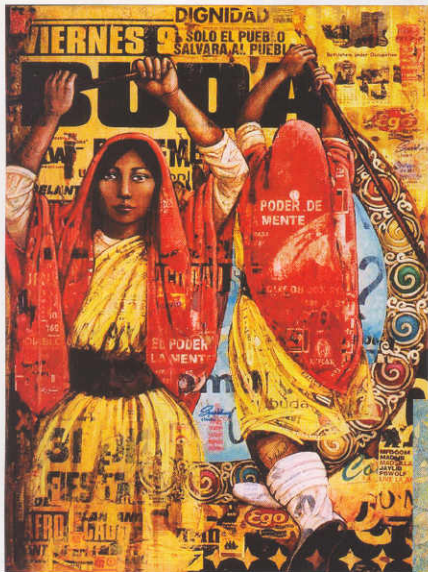
Others creating breakout work include mixed-media political artist Erin Currier and minimalist painter Johnnie Winona Ross, both represented by the Parks Gallery; and Debbie Long, whose minimalist paintings and cast glass work are at the Fenix Gallery. Still in her 30s, Long is being compared to such octogenarian masters as Agnes Martin and Beatrice Mandelman.

**N**ative American art, too, has long played an important role in the artistic offerings of the Taos Valley, where Taos Pueblo and a growing tribal population provide traditional arts and craft. But you also find Rory Wagner, whose work defies Native artistic pigeonholes. His paintings, infused with unexpected geometric patterns and colors, can be seen at Wilder Nightingale Fine Art.

And Tony Abeyta's work, at Blue Rain Gallery, pushes Native American stereotypes even further with black and white organic monotypes, vivid Navajo scenes and three-dimensional social commentaries incorporating wooden kachinas.

Encouraging the new and unconventional is a given at Blue Rain, a gallery quickly earning a reputation for showing the most interesting, forward-leaning contemporary works in town. "We were founded as a contemporary Native American gallery, but our work





## RIGHT AT HOME

The Taos Art Museum and the Millicent Rogers Museum are both housed in former residences.

In the home and studio of Nicolai Fechin, Russian-born artist and immigrant to Taos in 1927, the Taos Art Museum displays more than 300 works by more than 50 local artists. Included are paintings by all of the Taos Society founders as well as work by the Taos Moderns and, of course, Fechin.

The Rogers collection has grown extensively since the death of the heiress, socialite and arts patron in 1953. It now includes Hispanic religious and domestic arts, kachina figures and Native pottery and paintings as well as exquisite examples of her own jewelry designs.

Other historic homes in the area open to the public are those of Ernest Blumenschein, Mabel Dodge Luhan and Don Antonio Severino Martinez.

"Pueblo Women," a mixed-media work by Erin Currier; "Taos Medicine Woman Coat" by Annette Randell, who opened Artemisia wearables and accessories gallery in 2002; and "Deer Amongst the Trees," an oil on canvas by Tony Abeyta.

**¡BIENVENIDO!**

For assistance with everything from lodging to dining to the newest gallery spaces, check the Taos Chamber website, [www.taoschamber.com](http://www.taoschamber.com), or call 800-732-TAOS. The Museum Association of Taos provides a good overview, including opening hours, admission and special events, at [www.taosmuseums.org](http://www.taosmuseums.org). The Taos Gallery Association's website, [www.taosgalleryassoc.com](http://www.taosgalleryassoc.com), has a list of member galleries including a map. Events are listed on the daily newspaper's online calendar at [www.taosnews.com](http://www.taosnews.com) or in its weekly arts supplement, *Tempo*.

A good number of galleries are located around Taos Plaza, as well as on Kit Carson Road and Paseo del Pueblo Norte, leading north out of town. Here's a small sampling of what you'll find:



"Killer Whale," a blown and sand carved glass work by Preston Singletary, incorporates Tlingit symbols and shapes. At top is Hans Van de Bovenkamp's 10-foot stainless steel sculpture "Stella in the Wind," at Lumina Gallery and Sculpture Gardens. "Tango Heat" was painted by Sharon Erbe, represented by Art Divas.



**Ars Longa**  
**132 Kit Carson Road**

The first art gallery constructed in Taos, the building has fireplaces, bancos, hand-carved corbels and furniture that complement the selection of paintings, sculpture and craft.

**Art Divas**  
**208 Paseo del Pueblo Norte**  
 Dedicated to promoting women ("and a few good men") and their art, this adobe space has works in a array of media, including pottery, jewelry and kinetic sculpture.

**Artemisia**  
**115 Bent St.**  
 Opened in 2002, the gallery offers a wide selection of art to wear and accessories, including owner Annette Randall's own contemporary designs.

**Blue Rain Gallery**  
**117 South Plaza**  
 Featuring contemporary Southwest and Native American art, Blue Rain has earned a reputation for promoting the works of forward-thinking artists in all media, including Preston Singletary, Roxanne Swentzell and Tammy Garcia.

**E envision Gallery**  
**1405 Paseo del Pueblo Norte**  
 Contemporary paintings and sculpture fill this philanthropic-minded gallery at the Overland Ranch Complex, with a percentage of each month's sales donated to charitable organizations.

**Fenix Gallery**  
**228-B Paseo del Pueblo Norte**  
 With a reputation for featuring nationally and internationally recognized artists including ceramic sculptor Ken Price, Fenix offers "serious contemporary art"—often reflecting on social issues or advocating cultural change.

**Inger Jirby Gallery and Sculpture Garden**  
**207 Ledoux St.**  
 The gallery displays vibrantly colored paintings and prints depicting South-

western landscapes and people by the Scandinavian-born artist, as well as kinetic sculptures by Fredrick Prescott.

**Jd Challenger Studio/Gallery**  
**221 Paseo del Pueblo Norte**  
 The works of Jd Challenger depict Native American people, heritage and traditions. The complex includes a working studio open to the public.

**Las Comadres Women's Cooperative Gallery**  
**228-A Paseo del Pueblo Norte**  
 Meaning "women friends," this co-op of Taos artists showcases 2-D work as well as silver jewelry, beadwork, tin work, weaving, mosaics and ceramics.



**Lumina Gallery and Sculpture Gardens**  
**239 Morada Lane**  
 Located next to the Mabel Dodge Luhan House, Lumina offers fine art, crafts and contemporary sculpture in a garden setting. Lumina North, a second location 10 minutes north of the Plaza on State Road 230, expands on the contemporary sculpture theme.

**Parks Gallery**  
**127-A Bent St.**  
 The Parks Gallery is known for its displays of the best contemporary artists, including the works of critically acclaimed mixed-media artist Melissa Zink.

**Variant Gallery**  
**135 North Plaza**  
 2-D works with a regional emphasis complement jewelry, pottery and sculpture at this gallery that's been in business for more than 25 years.

**Wildier Nightingale Fine Art**  
**119-A Kit Carson Road**  
 The works of Native American talent Rory Wagner and '70s-era Taos 6 member Ray Vnella are among the paintings showcased.

**Zane Wheeler Gallery**  
**107-A North Plaza**  
 The gallery offers paintings, metal sculptures and textiles along with a wide variety of contemporary glass from regional artists.



Inger Jirby Gallery and Sculpture Garden, in a 200-year-old adobe complex on Ledoux Street, includes the owner's oil paintings plus sculptures by Fredrick Prescott and three other New Mexican artists. At left is "No Water, No Corn," an oil painting by Jim Vogel. Below, an interior of Wilder Nightingale Fine Art.

has broadened some," says director Peter Stoessel.

Visitors still encounter traditional Southwest themes from local Pueblo Indians, but they also see Hispanic and Anglo artworks, including contemporary displays of pueblo pottery, jewelry, glass, weavings, baskets and bronze and stone sculpture. Gallery artists meriting particular attention include Donna Lopez, a weaver known for her contemporary designs and vivid color saturation; Jim Vogel, whose paintings frequently incorporate agricultural scenes and the working class from northern New Mexico; and Tammy Garcia, known internationally for her exquisite bronze designs.

The appeal of visiting Taos now includes the opportunity to see some of the most excit-

ing contemporary art in the Southwest, says Rob Nightingale, owner of Wilder Nightingale Fine Art and president of the Taos Gallery Association. Even better, he says, a visit allows art lovers an unparalleled opportunity to meet those emerging artists face to face.

**W**hatever style of art you like, those artists are living in Taos," he comments. "If you go to Chicago you can fall in love with an abstract artist living in Prague. In Taos, on the other hand, you have a high chance of actually meeting the artist that captures you. You can go to The Historic Taos Inn (a restaurant and inn just north of Taos Plaza) and have a margarita with the artists."

Notes LaGro, "People who come to Taos to buy art are generally looking for a soul connection. They want work they can connect with."

Much the same as what draws the artists to Taos. ●

Freelancer **AMY ECKERT** writes about travel and the arts from her home in Holland, Mich. Her travels take her to the Southwest at least twice a year.

