

OWINGS-DEWEY FINE ART

A GALLERY FOR 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN ART
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EANGER IRVING COUSE

(b. 1866 Saginaw, Michigan – d. 1936 Taos, New Mexico)

Media: Oil

Education: Académie Julien, Paris; Art Institute of Chicago; National Academy of Design, NY.

Collections: (partial list) The Anschutz Collection, Denver; Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York; Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, TX; Detroit Institute of Arts, MI; Fort Worth Art Center, TX; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; Milwaukee Art Center, WI; Montclair Art Museum, NJ; Mulvane Art Museum, Topeka; Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, NM; National Gallery, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC; Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa; Santa Barbara Museum of Art, CA; Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio.

Reference Material:

Coke, Van Deren, Taos and Santa Fe The Artist's Environment 1882-1942. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1963.

Nelson, Mary Carroll, The Legendary Artists of Taos, Watson-Guption Publications, New York, 1980.

Taggett, Sherry Clayton and Schwartz, Ted, Paintbrushes and Pistols, How the Taos Artist Sold the West. John Muir Publications, Santa Fe, 1990.

E. Irving Couse was born in Saginaw, Michigan in 1866. He spent his childhood in the remote logging center, sketching the local Chippewa and Ojibwa Indians. In 1884 he spent three months at the Chicago Art Institute and from 1885-1887, Couse was a student at the National Academy of Design in New York, where each year he won awards at the academy's student exhibitions. On returning to Saginaw, Couse painted portraits of his townsmen for a year and then went to Paris in 1887 where he studied under Robert Fleury and Adolphe Bouguereau at the Académie Julien. Bouguereau was the consummate academician whose style was extremely popular. Couse followed the academic tradition enthusiastically and with it, found success as a young American student in Paris. He won the highest honors offered by the Académie Julien and had his works accepted into the Salon de Paris.

While in Paris, Couse expressed his interest in painting Indians to Blumenschein and Sharp. They told him about the colorful costumes and rituals of the Taos tribe and shared

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with him their enthusiasm for Taos. Couse was convinced by their descriptions, and in 1902 made his first summer visit to New Mexico. Taos wrought its magical attraction on Couse and he arranged his life to spend as many months as possible in Taos each year until 1927, when he became a permanent resident. In the early years Couse only sketched in New Mexico and did his painting in New York, where he lived part of the year in order to make suitable connections to promote his works.

In 1915 Couse, along with fellow Taos artists Blumenschein, Sharp, Phillips, Dunton and Berninghaus formed an association to promote the sale of their work through traveling exhibitions. In those days Taos had no commercial galleries, nor many tourists and it was felt that a group exhibition would attract attention and sales in other parts of the country. From its inception until its final dissolution in 1927, the Taos Society of Artists was a successful commercial venture.

Trained in the strict academic manner, Couse became a specialist and used his skill to paint a vast number of Indian compositions which were inordinately popular with both prize juries and the public for many years. More than any other early Taos artist, Couse, with his loving faith in the Indian, spoke directly to the sensitivities of his time. In his work he sought to preserve a condition of innocence, imagined or real, that existed with the Taos Indians. Once established, Couse did not attempt to change his academic style during the quarter century he painted in New Mexico. His success recalls the very popular French academic painter Gérôme, who expended so much of his talent depicting the life of the Moors and Arabs. Both men met a widespread demand for a poetic ideal associated with the concept of man's goodness when existing in a state of primitive freedom.

Couse used his abundant technique to represent the quiet aspects of Indian life. His part broadly-brushed, part detailed style often was applied to a crouching figure or group of figures silhouetted against the adobe wall of a pueblo. The decorating of pottery or the making of a ceremonial drum are not dramatic subjects, but these offered Couse an opportunity to display his ability to distinguish in paint between a smoothly-worn surface of a bowl and the equally smooth body of a briefly-clad figure. His carefully posed Indians retained the flavor of the studio nudes despite their exotic surroundings. Each part of his canvas was finished to a flowing luster. Side-lighting, as it flooded through an open door, was often Couse's way of emphasizing the plastic quality of a figure which he surrounded with storytelling artifacts. In order to provide the maximum amount of picturesque lighting. Couse frequently included a camp fire to create a mysterious and luminous effect both in color and shadowy form, played against meticulously rendered still-life elements.

Couse was a slow, methodical painter, but he was also a steady one, and over his fairly long career he created over 1,500 oils, until his death in 1936.

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