

A “Creator of Creators”

How Mabel Dodge Luhan Catalyzed Southwest American Modernism

BY LOIS P. RUDNICK

THROUGHOUT HER LIFE, Mabel Dodge Luhan (1879–1962) engaged in a complex circulation of relationships, influences, patronage, and constructions of creative spaces that inspired painter Marsden Hartley to describe her as a “creator of creators.” American women like Mabel were as much responsible for the many varieties of modernism that flourished in the first half of the twentieth

century as the critics, gallery owners, and museum entrepreneurs who have been given most of the credit for doing so. The past four decades of scholarship have opened up new ways of understanding the cultural “contact zones” that were created between and among Euro-American, Native American, and Hispano artists and patrons who shaped one another.

In her brilliant essay “The Turn of the Primitive,” anthropologist Ruth Miller shows us how we can tell the story of the modern encounter with the “primitive,” which was so fundamental to both European and North American modernisms, in multiple ways. We can tell it as a story of cultural imperialism and appropriation on the part of European and American artists and patrons, by which indigenous, colonized, and marginalized peoples of color became the fodder for the revitalization of European and Euro-American artists and national cultures. We can also tell it as a story of “dialogic exchange,” in which indigenous artists found Euro-Americans’ “interest and appreciation a valuable counter to long-standing history of oppression and exclusion.” These views offered “new and liberating possibilities that responded to needs for economic subsistence, self-realization and cultural preservation” and allow the indigenous artist to turn “modernist primitivism into indigenous modernity.”

The fact that both stories are true—and that other variants exist—underscores the reasons for the ongoing fascination with the richly multifaceted and contentious meanings of American modernism.

There is, nevertheless, a need for greater recognition of the still under-acknowledged importance of “Southwest modernism”: the roles played by Euro-American writers, patrons, and social activists, as well as by Pueblo and Hispano artists of northern New Mexico, in their productions of new regional, ethnic, national, and transnational identities. This orientation also included a reorientation away from Europe—and toward Mexico and Latin America—as a means of creating an interhemispheric identity for the Americas. Mabel Dodge Luhan was a nexus of these endeavors.



Nicolai Fechin (1881–1955), *Mabel Dodge Luhan*, 1927. Oil on canvas, 50 × 40 in.
Courtesy of American Museum of Western Art — The Anschutz Collection.

AFTER SHE MOVED to Greenwich Village, in the fall of 1912, Mabel took up the modernist credo with a vengeance, embracing free love, psychoanalysis, progressivism, anarchism, post-impressionist art, and political theater with equal enthusiasm, and she placed herself as a student and client at the behest of the leaders of these movements. Alfred Stieglitz became her most important artistic seer in New York. Mabel spent hours at his gallery, 291, and published in his journal *Camera Work*. She undertook psychoanalysis with two of the leading Freudian psychiatrists in the United States, Smith Ely Jelliffe and A. A. Brill; she supported (and was published in) Emma Goldman's anarchist magazine, *Mother Earth*, and wrote for what was arguably the finest radical journal of the prewar era, *The Masses*, edited by Max Eastman and John Reed. Mabel joined Heterodoxy, a radical feminist consciousness-raising group that included powerful women like Crystal Eastman (cofounder of the American Civil Liberties Union).

In early January 1913, Mabel flung herself into the final weeks of preparations for the Armory Show, the most important exhibition of modern art to come to the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century. It opened February 7, 1913, at the 69th Street Regiment Armory building. Mabel wrote about it at the time: "I think it is the most important thing that ever happened in America, of its kind . . . What is needed is more, more and always more consciousness, both in art and in life." She made available for distribution at the exhibition copies of Gertrude Stein's *Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia* (1912), and she published the first analysis—and still one of the most acute—of Stein's early work, "Speculations, or Post-Impressionism in Prose," in a special March 1913 issue of *Arts & Decoration*.

When World War I broke out in August 1914, Mabel was in Paris. It is almost impossible to exaggerate the devastating impact that World War I had on the radical vanguard of Mabel's circle, dispersing many of them, deporting some (Emma Goldman, to Russia), destroying community, and subjecting even apolitical magazines like Alfred Stieglitz's *Camera Work* to censorship.



Marsden Hartley (1877–1943), *Blessing the Melon: Indians Bring the Harvest to Christian Mary for Her Blessing*, ca. 1918. Hartley spent five months in Taos, at Mabel's rented apartments in town, and seven months in Santa Fe, in 1918–1919. Oil on canvas, 32 3/4 × 23 7/8 in. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949 (1949-18-13).

Art historian Robert Rosenblum has pointed out that after the man-made debacle of World War I, the "sacrosanct world of prehistoric nature" moved to a central place in the worldview of many American modernist artists.

Mabel proved prescient when she sent Maurice Sterne to Santa Fe, New Mexico, in October 1917, six months after they were married. Asked later in life why she chose this remote outpost, she talked about falling in love with a painting by E. Irving Couse of a Taos Indian, which she may have seen during the November 1917 circuit exhibition of the Taos Society of Artists in New York City.

RESEARCH NOTES

In November, Maurice wrote Mabel the letter that would alter the rest of her life and lead to Taos and its environs becoming one of *the* centers of modern art, literature, patronage, and Native American rights activism in the nation. It was, as newspaper writers and art critics would reiterate frequently over the next decades, Mabel Dodge Luhan who put Taos on the map of modern American culture.

Without the circle Mabel had established in New York, there would have been no putting Taos on this map, although her Taos domain would come to include international figures like D. H. Lawrence and Carl Jung, as well as lines of influence and

members of community enclaves that embraced western American and Mexican locations, including writers, artists, choreographers, and composers: Mary Austin, Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Willa Cather, Martha Graham, Robinson Jeffers, Leopold Stokowski, Miguel Covarrubias, and Carlos Chávez.

In Taos, Mabel took up Alfred Stieglitz's call for the creation of a distinctive national culture rooted in an American "spirit of place." She also took up the shared belief of her New York social reformer friends that non-Anglo, nonwhite cultures had laid the groundwork for a revitalized American civilization whose cultural productions would equal or surpass those of Europe. She drew some of Stieglitz's most important acolytes to Taos in service to this vision: Marsden Hartley, John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Paul and Rebecca Salsbury Strand. Santa Fe already had a small circle of modernists by 1917. But Mabel wanted her own domain.

Within two weeks of her mid-December arrival in New Mexico, on January 1, 1918, she settled in Taos. Soon she convinced avant-garde New York painter Andrew Dasburg to come to Taos (where he would "father" two generations of modern painters). She also met Antonio Lujan, a Taos Pueblo Indian, who would become first her lover, then her husband (in 1923), and encourage her to buy the land on which they built their compound—*Los Gallos*, incorporating the seventeen-room Big House and five guesthouses. (Mabel purportedly changed the spelling of her last name from "Lujan" to "Luhan" because her Anglo friends could not pronounce the Spanish *jota*. Tony's spelling remained "Lujan.")

OVER THE NEXT three decades, Luhan drew an extraordinary number of "creative souls" to her home, where she and Tony helped them experience what Mabel described to D. H. Lawrence as "the dawn of the world."

The leaders of the Anglo arts communities of Santa Fe and Taos, most of whom hailed from major urban centers, perceived northern New Mexico as a new world whose terrain, climate, and Native and Hispano peoples offered a model of ecological, spiritual, and artistic integration for an alienated and decadent Western civilization. They saw themselves as social and cultural change agents who were advocates for living, not "vanishing," cultures. While their embrace of Pueblo and Hispano cultures was often based on a historical and primitivist notions, they provided visibility, support, and appreciation for Hispano and Pueblo cultures that placed their cultural productions on a par with those of modern Euro-American artists.



A Man of Taos, Tony Lujan, ca. 1930. Photograph by Ansel Adams. Collection Center for Creative Photography © 2016 The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust.



Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986), *The Lawrence Tree*, 1929. Oil on canvas, 31 × 40 in. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Caitlin Sumner Collection Fund. © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum.

What distinguished the modern arts communities established in Santa Fe, around Alice Corbin Henderson and Mary Austin, and in Taos, around Mabel Luhan, was that they did not view their presence there as “retreats” from the world. Their agenda was ambitious and outward looking, as they sought national and international audiences for their alternative models of community and culture. Of course, their motives were not purely altruistic. Showcasing the art and culture of previously devalued peoples, for whom they became cultural brokers and arbiters of value and authenticity, gained them a great deal of authority and power, which they often wielded—as patrons—in a patronizing way.

Recent scholarship on the Pueblo and Hispano artists whose cultures and homelands provided the core experiences, ideas, and artifacts that inspired these Anglo sojourners’ lives and works have provided new ways of understanding their agency in the creation and production of their own indigenous modernisms. This “native-modern interchange” was “mutually transformative” from the beginning of the first encounters of Indian painters and white patrons in the Southwest, where Native American easel painting was invented. This was equally true for a smaller number of Hispano woodcarvers, most importantly Patrociño Barela, whom Stephanie Lewthwaite refers to as a “transcultural change agent” engaged in creating an “alternative hybrid modernism.”

Mabel Dodge Luhan and her “company” have been excoeriated for the many ways in which they contributed to the fantasy of New Mexico as the “Land of Enchantment,” which has obscured its (still) “third world” economic profile and racial inequalities. But they can also be lauded for the remarkably progressive and inclusive foundations they laid for an understanding of our multicultural national heritage, embracing the cultures of Hispano and Pueblo peoples, which have historic precedence and a still-living presence on this land. ■

Lois P. Rudnick is professor emerita of American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston, where she chaired the American Studies Department for twenty-six years. She has taught, lectured, and published widely on modern American culture and history, and on the artist and writer communities of Santa Fe and Taos.

Sources

- Mabel Dodge Luhan. *Intimate Memories: Movers and Shakers*. New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1999.
- . *Lorenzo in Taos*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1932.
- Ruth Miller. “The Turn of the Primitive.” In *Exiles, Diasporas, and Strangers*, edited by Kobena Mercer. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008.
- Robert Rosenblum. “The Primal Scene.” In *The Natural Paradise: Painting in America, 1800–1950*, edited by Kynaston McShine. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984.
- James Timothy Voorhies. *My Dear Stieglitz: Letters of Marsden Hartley and Alfred Stieglitz, 1912–1915*. Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2010.

This essay was adapted from *Mabel Dodge Luhan & Company: American Moderns and the West*, edited by Lois P. Rudnick and MaLin Wilson-Powell (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2016). The Harwood Museum of Art in Taos hosts the exhibition of the same name through September 11, 2016. It moves to the Albuquerque Museum of Art and History October 29, 2016 and runs through January 22, 2017. It then relocates to Mabel’s birthplace in Buffalo, New York, at the Burchfield Penney Art Center, March 10 to May 28, 2017.