

ON EXHIBIT

The View from Out There

Cady Wells: Ruminations at the New Mexico Museum of Art

BY CHRISTIAN WAGUESPACK



Cady Wells, *Untitled*, ca. 1935. Watercolor on paper, 11 × 14½ in. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Bequest of Vivian Sloan Fiske, 1978 (4119.23P). Photograph by Blair Clark.

“I think New Mexico is the greatest experience I ever had from the outside world.” —D. H. Lawrence

For the better part of the twentieth century, Northern New Mexico represented the possibility of a life that could not be lived elsewhere. As D. H. Lawrence noted, it was, and is, a place outside the norm. For many gay men and lesbian women, it offered the promise of freedom and community denied to them. Anyone at all familiar with the history of Santa Fe and Taos would readily acknowledge the profound impact that arts

communities have had in crafting a distinct identity for northern New Mexico. Not so widely acknowledged is the importance that queer communities played in making New Mexico an arts destination. In his engaging memoir *Unbuttoned: Gay Life in the Santa Fe Art Scene*, Walter Cooper laments, “So much of our queer history has been swept under the rug, it’s almost as if we never existed. People tend to underrate or ignore ‘the



queer factor,' the enormous impact gay folk have made on New Mexico's unique cultural life." What drew so many gay artists to this part of the country was the potential for a sort of sexual freedom and a community of acceptance that has since gone greatly unrecognized.

Modernist painter Cady Wells became one of the many gay artists who settled in northern New Mexico, in part because of its potential for community, both artistic and queer, and most often both at the same time. In recognition of the work he made here, the New Mexico Museum of Art presents *Cady Wells: Ruminations*, on view March 25 through September 17, an exhibition that showcases a selection of the artist's New Mexico watercolors. Wells' love of the Southwest developed hand-in-hand with his coming to terms with his sexuality. Though Wells first came to live in New Mexico in 1932, his love affair with the Southwest started long before that. In 1922 Wells' father sent him from his hometown of Southbridge, Massachusetts, to the Evans Ranch School, near Tucson, Arizona, in the hope that it would make the effeminate Cady manlier. At Evans Ranch School, Wells was absolutely captivated by the rugged western landscape and the rodeo and began to experiment with his

same-sex desires more openly, although still with a significant amount of trepidation. Years later, on a drive through New Mexico, he met painter and author E Boyd, who would become a lifelong friend and advisor. She invited him to stay, and from that point on Wells called New Mexico home.

Wells is arguably the most interesting Southwestern modernist that few people have ever heard of. In recent decades Wells has developed a growing reputation, but he is not as popular as his contemporaries Georgia O'Keeffe or Andrew Dasburg. What were the factors that kept Wells from achieving wider recognition, and what did he gain from his life in New Mexico? Fame is not a science, but some of the factors contributing to Wells' delayed recognition can be attributed to the unique way he depicted his subject matter, his chosen medium, and social hindrances. Lois P. Rudnick noted the following in *Cady Wells and Southwestern Modernism*, the most thorough and compelling study of Wells' career to date.

Art Historian Kate Duncan has rightly argued that Wells met "the broad challenge of his medium [watercolor], exploring the possibilities and testing its resilience to a degree few artists have approached," in service to a deeply "personal vision." Ironically, these are two of the reasons, I believe, for his near invisibility on the map of Southwestern modernism: watercolor typically ranks much lower than oil painting, both in terms of monetary value and aesthetic significance, while Wells' mature work (from 1935 onward) doesn't really fit into any of the predominant styles associated with the Santa Fe and Taos moderns.

Whatever the circumstances that kept Wells in the proverbial closet of art history, he is out now, and his remarkable contribution to Southwestern Modernism and the arts in New Mexico is finally beginning to be recognized. As for what he gained from a life in the Southwest, perhaps the most was being part of a creatively engaged and sexually liberated community. During his New Mexico years, Wells developed significant relationships with prominent artists working in the region, including E Boyd, Andrew Dasburg, Raymond Jonson, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Rebecca Salisbury James, among many others.

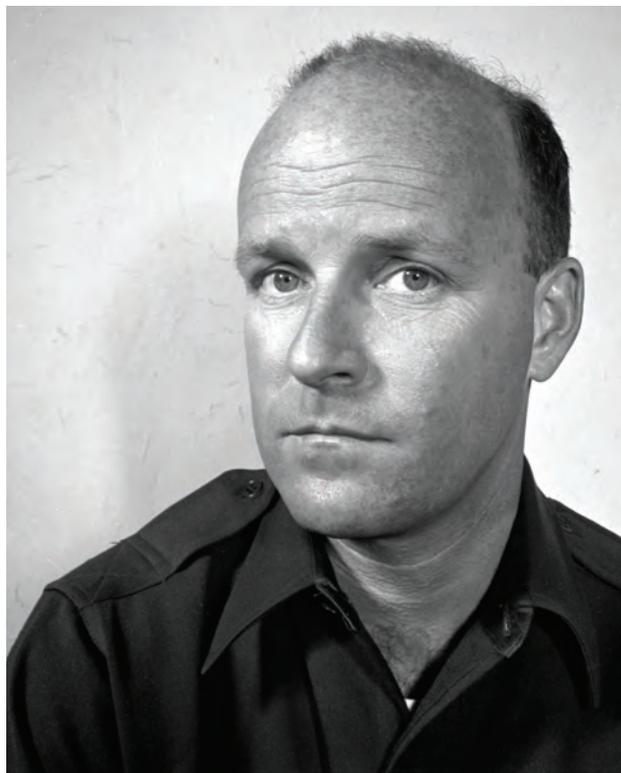
Andrew Dasburg and Raymond Jonson were early artistic influences for the young Wells. He began his studies under Dasburg soon after his arrival in New Mexico and, to a great extent, his early painting style can be attributed to his study

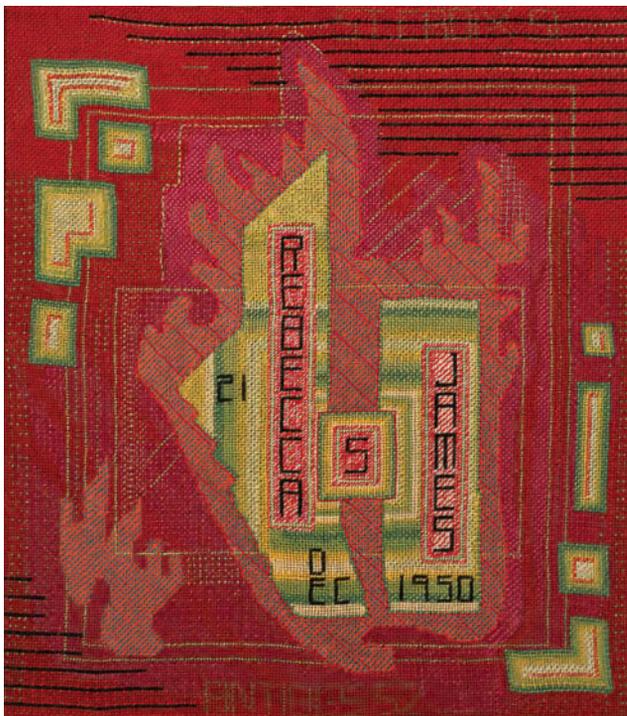
Opposite: Interior of Cady Wells' home, Jacona, New Mexico, ca. 1955. Photograph by Tyler Dingee. Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 059491. **Right, top:** Cady Wells. Photograph by John Candelario. Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 179230. **Right, bottom:** E Boyd, Santa Fe, New Mexico, ca. 1935. Photograph by Lansing Brown. Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 160379.

with Dasburg. The inspiration for Wells' confident, energetic brushwork, as seen in works like *Tree/Lane* (1933) (page 87) and *Untitled* (ca. 1935) (page 83), comes from a combination of his study with Dasburg and an early interest in Japanese painting. Wells first visited Asia in 1931 and was so impressed by what he saw there that he decided to devote his life to art. In 1935, he returned for two months to study Japanese painting. It was during this time that Wells developed his signature brushwork. Around the time that Wells painted *Tree/Lane*, Dasburg was painting similarly abstracted watercolors of the New Mexican landscape, though his brushwork often lacks the energy and enthusiasm seen in Wells' watercolors.

O'Keeffe also became a mentor and close friend. Walter Cooper observes, "while distancing herself from Santa Fe's lesbian colony, O'Keeffe enjoyed the company of gay and bisexual men, among them poet Spud Johnson, artist Cady Wells, and wealthy rancher Richard Pritzlaff." Their relationship was alternately tender and turbulent. Sometimes O'Keeffe advocated for Wells, and sometimes she obstructed his professional progress back East. In 1944, Wells and O'Keeffe were both showing in New York, and in her introduction to Wells' catalogue O'Keeffe wrote, "I believe we are the two best painters working in our part of the country." Cooper offers another perspective on their relationship when he shares an anecdote from several years earlier. "In 1937, Wells wanted Alfred Stieglitz to exhibit his work in his New York gallery, but O'Keeffe and Stieglitz agreed that Wells still wasn't ready. Wells actually threatened to 'choke her' after she wrote him, 'I do not find yourself in your paintings,' likely suggesting a lack of 'manliness' in his artwork." It is unclear what exactly accounted for O'Keeffe's change of heart, but the relationship between the two artists grew stronger over the years and Wells remained one of O'Keeffe's closest gay friends until the end of his life.

Another indomitable woman to with whom Wells developed a close friendship was painter and scholar E Boyd Van Cleave, who served as his model for the watercolor *Portrait of E #1*. Boyd





crafted for herself an identity that defied gender norms of the time. She chose to go by E Boyd, a name that did not reveal her sex, and she maintained an androgynous persona throughout her life. Wells and Boyd shared a passion for the Spanish colonial arts of New Mexico, and with her guidance, he amassed an outstanding collection of over 250 pieces. Wells not only collected colonial art; he also used these pieces as inspiration and subject matter for his paintings, including *Head of Santo*, from 1939.

Even in his choice of media, Wells challenged the heterosexual masculinity that had come to dominate the modern art scene in the United States. In the early 1950s, Wells stitched *Rebecca S James*, a yarn on linen petit point with the name of his closest friend sewn in vertical columns at the center of the composition. James was herself no stranger to unconventional arts media, working in reverse oils on glass and colcha embroidery around the same time Wells made his tribute to her. James' interest in these materials came from the same Spanish colonial traditions that so infatuated Wells. Whereas James' often depicted more conventional subject matter, flowers or the Lamb of God for instance, Wells' needle work still expressed the almost biological abstraction that he was working in around this

Left: Cady Wells, *Rebecca S James*, 1950. Yarn on linen, 15 ¾ × 14 in. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Gift of the E Boyd Estate, 1975 (3308.23P). Photograph by Blair Clark. **Opposite:** Cady Wells, *Tree/Lane*, 1933. Watercolor on paper, 11 × 14 ½ in. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Gift of the Cady Wells Estate, 1982 (1982.16.33a). Photograph by Blair Clark.

time, with the same acid colors. During this period, “serious” (male) artists often pejoratively associated textiles with “women’s work,” a circumstance that led many later feminist artists to embrace the medium. This gendered hierarchy of the arts did not restrict Wells.

Part of what influenced Wells to make a life for himself in New Mexico was the opportunity to be involved with the more sexually tolerant climate of the artistic communities in Taos and Santa Fe. These meccas for artists, writers, and often offbeat characters presented a freedom still unavailable to folks back East, where the stodgy holdovers of Victorian morality could seem oppressive. Art and life were inexorably linked for Wells, and the ability to openly express his sexual orientation went hand in hand with a freedom in exploring unconventional directions in his art. In New Mexico, Wells surrounded himself with a community that allowed him to more fully embrace his queer identity, all the while pursuing a distinctive view of the Southwest in his artwork. ■

References:

- Rudnick, Lois P., Robin Farwell Gavin, and Sharyn Rohlfson Udall. *Cady Wells and Southwestern Modernism*. Museum of New Mexico Press, 2009.
- Cooper, Walter. *Unbuttoned: Gay Life in the Santa Fe Arts Scene: A Memoir*. North Charleston, South Carolina: CreateSpace, 2016.

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Cady Wells: Ruminations showcases watercolor paintings from one of the Southwest's most interesting modernists. It is on exhibit in the Roland Gallery and Women's Board Room at the New Mexico Museum of Art from March 25 through September 17, 2017.

