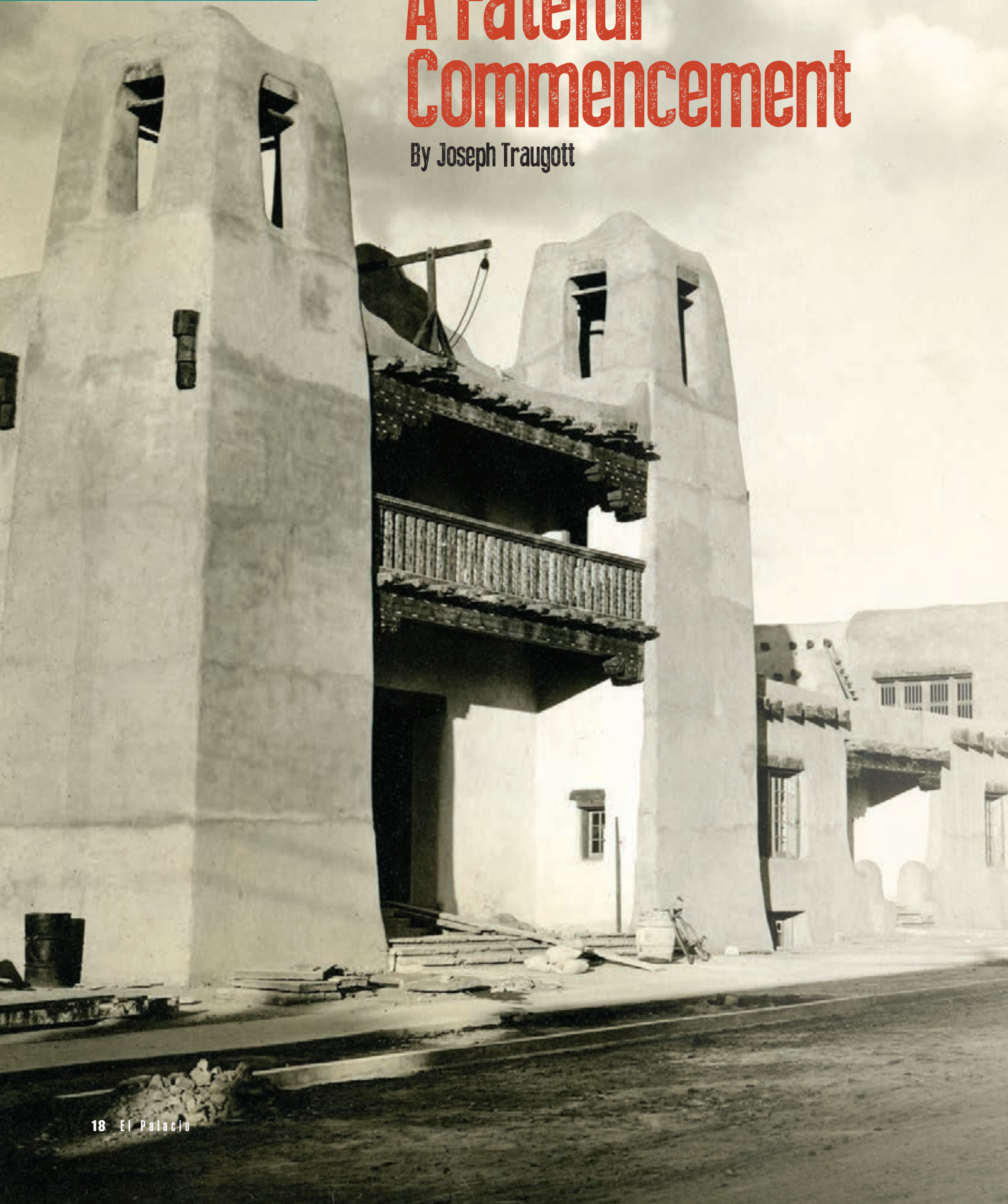


A Fateful Commencement

By Joseph Traugott





**One hundred years ago,
five paintings in the
New Mexico Museum of Art's
first exhibition challenged the world
to think about New Mexico and
its art. The times may be different,
but the challenge continues.**

One hundred years ago, New Mexico's famed light streamed through the new museum's skylights at its very first exhibition. That same light emboldened the artists whose 172 paintings graced the museum's pristine walls. More than a thousand people attended the museum's opening festivities in November 1917. The thirty-eight European American artists depicted mostly Native American subjects, with varying levels of verisimilitude and sentiment. Although nobody present could have predicted this, these glowing paintings would define the trajectory of Southwestern art for the next thirty years.

The museum's centennial gives us a fine opportunity to contemplate the impact of this exhibition. To do this, we must examine these works from both historical and contemporary perspectives. Five monumental paintings from the first exhibition serve as prime objects outlining the subjects and styles addressed in this exhibition: Gerald Cassidy's *Cui Bono*, Leon Kroll's *Santa Fe Hills*, Henry C. Balink's *Pueblo Pottery*, Joseph Henry Sharp's *The Stoic*, and Robert Henri's *Portrait of Dieguito Roybal, San Ildefonso Pueblo*. The meanings of these works are not frozen in the past. Their connotations have evolved over the decades, reflecting the dynamic complexities of New Mexico.

Promoting New Mexico and the New Museum

Edgar Lee Hewett served as the guest editor of the January–February 1918 issue of *Art and Archaeology*, the monthly journal of the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA). Normally, this elite publication emphasized classical subjects from Europe, North Africa, and the Near East, but this double issue featured the opening of Santa Fe's museum. In the form of photographs about the region, misleading bits of local history, local architecture, Catholic missions, and dreary dedication speeches that droned on for pages, Hewett oriented readers to his version of the American Southwest.

But most importantly, *Art and Archaeology* reproduced paintings by thirty-five of the artists in the exhibition, all presented as high-quality, halftone illustrations. Santa Fe culture czar Hewett implied to the journal's international audience that art and archaeology developments in Santa Fe were as important as those in Greece, Rome, and Palestine. Gifts to the museum were usually described as gifts to "the school," expressing Hewett's conflicted institutional interests.

Fine Arts Museum shortly before opening, 1917.

Photograph by Wesley Bradfield. Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 012967.



Gerald Cassidy, *Cui Bono*, ca. 1911. Oil on canvas, 93 ½ × 48 in. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Gift of Gerald Cassidy, 1915 (282.23P). Photograph by Blair Clark.

While running poorly recorded archaeological excavations, he served as the unpaid director of the Museum of New Mexico and its new art museum, and also directed the School of American Research (a subdivision of the AIA that became known as the School of American Archaeology from 1907–1917 and now is known as the School of Advanced Research).



Taos Society of Artists paintings were the biggest draw to the first exhibition at the new museum. Many of the members were well-known illustrators, and articles about the society had been featured in literary journals. The group was well known in Santa Fe because Hewett had given them three exhibitions at the newly renovated Palace of the Governors, beginning in 1915. After training in Europe and tiring of European subjects, the artists of the TSA returned home seeking picturesque American scenes. The members quickly “discovered” Pueblo Indians, even though their ancestors had been living in New Mexico for at least 13,000 years. The success of their displays underscored Santa Fe’s need for an art museum.

These well-established artists formed their hierarchical society in 1915 to promote their rather academic, Realism-inspired paintings of Indians by organizing sales exhibitions that traveled around the United States. Eastern high society found the TSA paintings chic, expensive, and commercially viable, so it is not surprising that of the thirty-eight TSA paintings in the exhibition, only Julius Rolshoven’s, *Portrait of Santiago Naranjo* and Joseph Henry Sharp’s *The Stoic* are now in the collection. The society’s sophisticated marketing gave their paintings extra buzz.

The Dramatic Western Scene

Cui Bono, a monumental painting by Santa Fe art colony co-founder Gerald Cassidy, depicts a Taos Pueblo man wrapped in a white blanket that shields him from the blazing summer sun. The Taos man’s carefully rendered face contrasts with a sun-drenched adobe wall, with the Pueblo’s north building and Taos mountain beyond. This larger-than-life study consolidates landscapes, Pueblo architecture, Pueblo peoples, harmony with nature, and cultural interaction into a single painting.

Many people assume that *Cui Bono* is the subject’s name, but it is actually a Latin phrase that means *Who benefits?* Cassidy painted this work as New Mexico was achieving statehood in 1912, and the title implies political content. The man’s eyes seem to ask, “Who will benefit from statehood, now and in the future?”

Serious talk of statehood began in the 1880s after the Santa Fe Railway connected the Territory of New Mexico to the rest of the country. Protestant, Anglo-Saxon members of Congress had balked at granting statehood because New Mexico's population was predominantly Native, Hispanic, and Catholic. As statehood began to seem inevitable, nosy anthropologists, artists, photographers, traders, and tourists flocked to traditional New Mexico communities, determined to capture the last fleeting views of lifeways they believed would disappear soon. In 1917 it was not clear how indigenous and Hispanic communities would benefit from the influx of outsiders who often viewed traditional cultures as backward, exotic, and strange. Both Native and Hispanic peoples remembered the crooked deals over land and water rights that coincided with the American Colonial period, beginning in 1846, and they had little reason to trust that they would be treated fairly.

Visitors not familiar with Southwestern cultures often assume that *Cui Bono* offers an authentic view from the Pueblo past. The dress looks the part; the architectural backdrop dates back at least seven centuries; and the scene truly looks as if were pulled from the pages of *National Geographic*. But not so. Cassidy portrayed an up-to-date Pueblo man from Taos expressing a contemporary, cross-cultural synthesis from the twentieth century—not bygone days. The man wears a machine-woven cotton blanket that may have come from a mail-order catalogue via the United States Postal Service. It looks like he is wearing blue jeans, but they are probably only the legs from a pair of jeans. To keep cool during the summer, it was common for men to cut off the legs of their jeans and wear them like chaps, suspended by garters, along with a traditional breech cloth. Cassidy's painting highlights the ability of Pueblo people to adopt new ways without surrendering to cultural assimilation.

Cui Bono has been on display for a century and now is understood as a symbol of the museum and its collections. The image is memorable and easily described by people who have only seen the work once. While his location within the museum often changed, *Cui Bono* was always on display.

Hewett and his supporters built the museum hoping that the Museum of New Mexico Art Gallery would spur economic development through tourism, and Leon Kroll's *Santa Fe Hills* exemplifies the picturesque settings travelers and tourists might encounter in Santa Fe. By the early-twentieth century, the Santa Fe Railway's advertisements, incorporating paintings



Leon Kroll, *Santa Fe Hills*, 1917. Oil on canvas (retouched later), 34 × 40 ¼ in. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Gift of the Museum of New Mexico Foundation, 1972 (2266.23P). Photograph by Blair Clark.

of indigenous peoples, successfully stimulated tourism and promoted economic development between Chicago and Los Angeles. At the time, viewers interpreted Kroll's work as an emotionally dynamic, modernist painting among a field of more academic, realistic images. Of the fifteen images of Hispanic subjects in this exhibition, *Santa Fe Hills* is the most compelling and mysterious.

Today, this painting's dramatic summer sky and dark storm clouds are more than signs of coming monsoons. Metaphorically, they allude to the cultural and artistic angst of twentieth-century New Mexico. Native people contended with rapid technological and economic change through expanded contact with non-Native Americans. The transition from a barter economy to a monetary economy challenged egalitarian aspects of Native life.

Kroll's storm clouds foretold bitter aesthetic fights between traditionalist painters and modern artists. The first controversy between artistic paradigms developed during the presidential campaign of 1920, when the *Santa Fe New Mexican* attacked the art shown in the new museum for being "Bolshevik" in character. At the time, Eugene V. Debs was running for president as a socialist, and many individuals in the arts community actively supported him. The paper's criticism was political, rather than artistic. Hewett also rejected *ultra-modernism*, a code word for art associated with "radicals" like John Sloan and Robert Henri. In response, Hewett fired affable painter Sheldon Parsons, the museum's manager, and that

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created a permanent rupture between the director and mild-mannered modernist painters that lasted until Hewett, aka “El Toro,” died in 1947.

This artistic and institutional struggle over the changing meaning of modernism lasted until near the end of the twentieth century. The final battle came in the early 1980s, when Georgia O’Keeffe offered to sell the museum one of her rare skull paintings. Some museum supporters wondered why the institution would want one of those paintings. Now, thirty-five years later, the museum still doesn’t have one.

The Ethnographic View

Paintings depicting Native people wearing traditional clothing, engaged in daily activities, and performing rituals dominated the first exhibition. Displaying what some considered to be strong ethnographic content, Henry Balink’s *Pueblo Pottery* hit the mark with its portrayal of a Pueblo woman offering ceramic wares for sale to tourists. Balink understood that Native women in tribal dress produced salable paintings, especially if they looked exotic to metropolitan audiences.

This compositional trope harks back to the nineteenth century, when French painters produced Orientalist images of exotic scenes in North Africa and the Middle East. John K. Hillers’ New Mexico photographs followed this style.



Henry C. Balink, *Pueblo Pottery*, 1917. Oil on canvas, 26 ¼ × 32 ½ in. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Gift of Herman C. and Bina L. Ilfeld, 1977 (2191.23P). Photograph by Blair Clark.

Beginning in 1879, his photographs often presented Native people posed in front of Navajo weavings hung as a backdrop, or engaged in indigenous rituals. His images were widely known in Bureau of Ethnography publications, and were transformed into wood engravings for publication in the literary journals of the period. This compositional formula was already stale to sophisticated readers, but by the time Balink came to New Mexico, it didn’t matter, because these scenes appealed to a broader audience hungry for romantic images of Native people.

Today, these paintings of Native people can seem like worn out stereotypes that are not really ethnographic in content, suffering from a syndrome that art historian George Kubler calls “replication.” These works were tailored for outsiders who were interested in romantic souvenirs of a positive experience exploring the land of Pueblo, Navajo, and Hispanic people. But today, such images have lost what Robert Plant Armstrong described as their “affecting presence.” If Balink had painted an ethnographic painting, it’s fair to suggest that he would have titled it more specifically *A Pueblo Potter and Her Vessels*, rather than the generalized *Pueblo Pottery*.



Not all scenes of Indian life generated romantic responses. Many viewers recoiled at the grisly scene Joseph Henry Sharp portrayed in *The Stoic*. This TSA work presents an Indian warrior dragging four horse heads attached to a stick pierced through his back muscles. Viewers at the first exhibition naturally assumed that Sharp depicted a Southwestern ritual because it was displayed in a New Mexican context.

But this ritual occurred in Montana, and Sharp claimed to have observed this practice on Crow Reservation around 1902. According to the tale, a warrior’s son died at an Indian boarding school, and the father had to prove that he could overcome the pain of his son’s death. So he slayed four of his favorite ponies, lashed their heads to his back, and dragged them until he dropped from exhaustion or they tore free from his back muscles.

The raw emotion of this painting is the antithesis of a scientific portrayal emphasizing ethnographic goals. The realistic presentation of the Crow warrior made this work a personification of the cultural other, the “noble savage.” Both the Canadian and US governments outlawed such Plains rituals beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, so this painting probably represents a ritual done in private.



Joseph Henry Sharp, *The Stoic*, 1914. Oil on canvas, 52 ½ × 61 ½ in. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Gift of Joseph Henry Sharp, 1917 (395.23P). Photograph by Blair Clark.

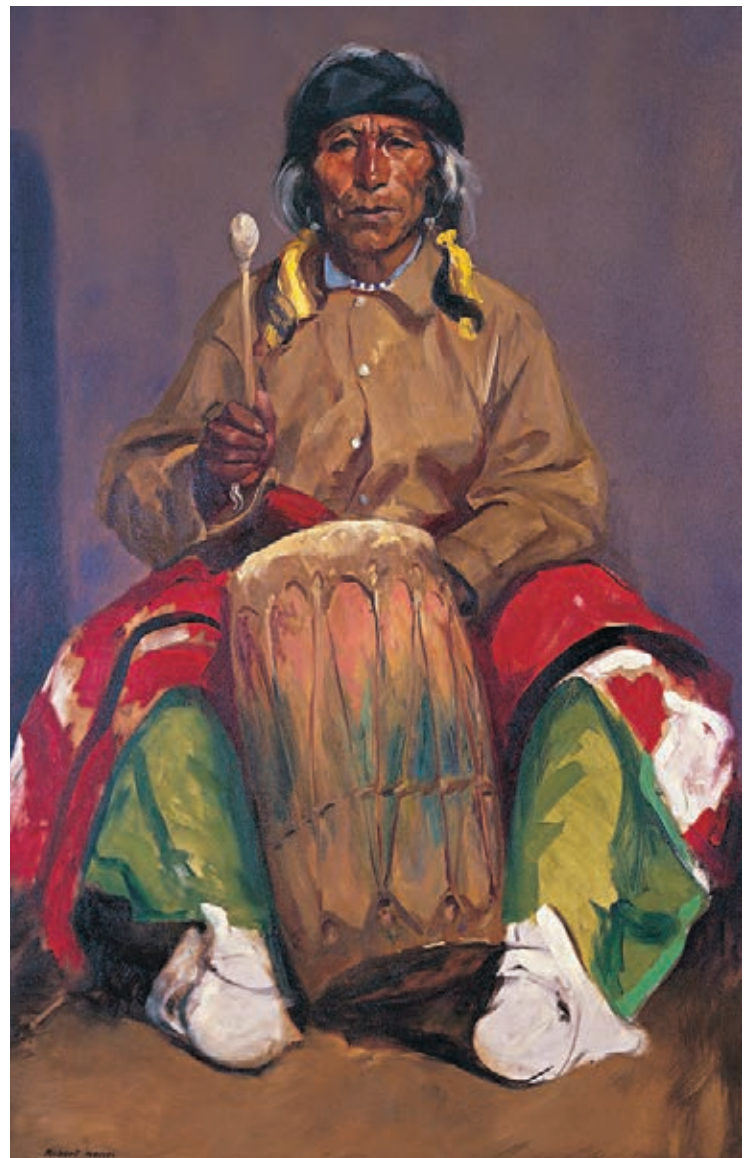
Today this painting rekindles racist stereotypes of Plains Indians that developed during the High Plains Wars of the late-nineteenth century. Artists fresh to the Southwest found it difficult to reject sensationalist rituals that seemed outrageous to Easterners in their prim Victorian parlors; rituals like the Hopi Snake Dance or Hispanic mock crucifixions. For example, against the explicit requests of the participants, photographer Charles F. Lummis literally captured his iconic 1888 photograph of a Penitente mock crucifixion. Mainstream artists often felt they could work unimpeded by matters of consent, exemplifying colonial attitudes of the period.



In contrast to Sharp, Robert Henri painted empowering portraits of Native people with a fusion of realist and expressionist brush strokes. Henri emphasizes the emotion of drumming as an essential component of Pueblo rituals in *Portrait of Dieguito Roybal, San Ildefonso Pueblo*. Roybal's face is realistically painted, and Henri depicts the drummer looking squarely at the viewer. But Henri renders Roybal's clothing and the drum with loosely painted, expressionistic brushstrokes that deliver a gush of complementary colors—flashy reds and acidic greens—that break with realist tradition. This portrait defines Pueblo-ness as a powerful burst of colorful energy.

Henri sought out individuals from ethnic backgrounds that Euro-American culture often demeaned, and sought to destroy

racist myths and stereotypes through sensitive paintings of scorned ethnicities. When Hewett met Henri painting portraits of Native people in California, it was a case of opposites attracting. Henri's anarchist tendencies clashed with Hewett's conventionally mainstream attitude. In a radical move, however, Henri convinced Hewett to organize the exhibitions at his museum based on an open-door policy, a concept allowing any New Mexico artist to exhibit in the museum without having to pass the muster of a conformist jury [read more, see Kate Nelson's "Finding Their Niche," bit.ly/Nelson_MOA].



Robert Henri, *Portrait of Dieguito Roybal, San Ildefonso Pueblo*, 1916. Oil on canvas, 67 × 40 in. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Gift of Robert Henri, 1916 (353.23P). Photograph by Blair Clark.

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A century later, *Dieguito* seems like a tame composition with subdued expressionist passages. Its early intention, however, had an immeasurably powerful impact. Henri broke with painterly and cultural traditions early in the twentieth century. In a truly radical approach, Henri empowered the powerless through energetic brush strokes.

A Holistic View of the First Exhibition

These five paintings represent the range of images on display at the first exhibition in the New Museum, from realistically painted portrayals of Native people to lightly abstracted representations. The exhibition included veiled commentaries about the politics of the period and represented a broad spectrum of popular Euro-American attitudes toward New Mexico and its Native people. With such a comprehensive exhibition, what could be missing?

Well, Native people. And Hispanic People. Not as the *subjects* of paintings, but as *artists* making works of art.

Hewett was well acquainted with Native artists. He had been working with Maria Martinez since 1909 when he gave her an unfired lump of clay from an archaeological site to see if she could mold it into a vessel—and she could. Maria and her sisters demonstrated pottery making in the courtyard of the Palace of the Governors, and a photograph of the three potters became a popular postcard from the nineteen-teens.



Alfredo Montoya, San Ildefonso Pueblo, *Deer and Antelope, Buffalo Dance*, ca. 1912. Watercolor and pencil on illustration board, 14 × 19 in. Museum of Indian Arts and Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology. Gift of Edna and Fred W. Henry, courtesy of John and Linda Comstock and the Abigail Van Vleck Charitable Trust, MIAC 35467/13.

When Hewett was excavating on the Pajarito Plateau around 1910, his workmen from San Ildefonso Pueblo began showing him watercolor paintings of Pueblo rituals and individual katsinas. He encouraged them to continue painting and bought their watercolors, beginning around 1910. Alfredo Montoya was one of the first Pueblo easel painters, and his stunning painting *Deer and Antelope, Buffalo Dance* presents a work not based on Renaissance perspective.

Hewett helped develop the Pueblo easel painting tradition by commissioning the San Ildefonso artists to paint works describing the ceremonial cycle at the Pueblo, yet he and Henri didn't include these paintings in the first exhibition. Why? The exclusion of indigenous artists' works from the museum's first exhibition betrays Hewett's belief, shared by many non-Native people in New Mexico, in a cultural hierarchy that ranked the white European and European American mainstream at the top. It appears that he considered Pueblo watercolors to be visual anthropology (collected initially for the School of American Research) and that pottery, weavings, and baskets were merely decorative objects.

El Palacio commented on a Maria Martinez pottery exhibition that included her recently invented, matte-on-black pottery in an announcement that described her work as "handicraft," inferring that her work was categorically different from the European American art usually shown in the museum [see *El Palacio*, July 8, 1920]. This short article praised Martinez's "artistic decoration" and predicted her pieces "will stand comparison with the best that has come out of the Orient, or the Occident, ancient or modern." It is noteworthy that the museum distinguished art from craft, painting from artistic decoration, Native from non-Native, and Maria Martinez from Henry Balink.

Over time, Hewett bowed to the popularity of Pueblo watercolors with his patrons and began incorporating Native-made art into art museum exhibitions and collections, but the museum's emphasis remained stubbornly European American, with non-Native painters describing Pueblo activities and rituals in a rather realistic style [see Bess Murphy's "Defining Moments" bit.ly/Murphy_MOA]. These works quickly transitioned from inventive paintings breaking with tradition into replications that became formulaic and lost affective power. One can only conclude that Hewett's view of art was purely conservative and Eurocentric with an emphasis on realist painting.

Looking Back

The first exhibition at the Museum of Art expressed a colonial perspective that represented the conventional wisdom of the period. While Henri, the anti-colonial activist, may have selected works for the exhibition, El Toro certainly approved the list. Hewett believed that Native American culture was declining in New Mexico at the beginning of the twentieth century. He clarified his beliefs in *Ancient Life in the American Southwest*, his rambling, 376-page narrative about Pueblo people. In it, he wondered, “what is to be the destiny of this Native American race? Are sacred fires permanently quenched, or can the flames of the spirit . . . be revived?” As a result of this ethnocentric idea, many new immigrants to New Mexico assumed the White Man’s Burden and felt compelled to “help” indigenous peoples assimilate by proselytizing about Christianity.

In *Ancient Life in the American Southwest*, Hewett took full credit for the efforts to reverse this perceived cultural decline in the Pueblos through the Santa Fe Program, a plan for interactions with Native people and based on the notion of the White Man’s Burden.

Some substantial results may be claimed for the Santa Fe experiment. It may be said that every art practiced by the Pueblos in ancient times has been brought back with the exception of basketry. The dramatic ceremonies have become understood; opposition to them is abating. A priceless heritage is being regained. Archaic ceremonies are being revived. Many never seen heretofore by white people are now performed in public.

His appraisal of the Santa Fe Program was self-congratulatory hyperbole; it implied that Native people couldn’t survive without external help. These were not new ideas; they were formed and reformed during the Spanish Colonial period (1598–1821), the Mexican Colonial period (1821–1846), and further refined during the American Colonial period (1846–1912).

Colonialism connotes an unequal power relationship between groups expressed through economic, political, and cultural relationships. Lingering colonial attitudes at the time included the belief in Manifest Destiny (the idea that God had empowered white culture to dominate the continent), the obligation expressed in the White Man’s Burden to assimilate indigenous people to mainstream culture, and the assumption that indigenous cultures were declining and

soon would disappear. A century ago, these concepts were intimately interconnected.

The clearest expression of these colonial attitudes is found in St. Francis Auditorium. Hewett proclaimed in his dedication address that “the architecture is that of the Franciscan mission of New Mexico, inaugurated three hundred years ago.” The permanent installation of six murals of Catholic scenes painted by Donald Beauregard transformed a secular building based on Pueblo and Spanish architectural elements into a religious edifice named for a Catholic saint. In a historic reference, Hewett noted in *Art and Archaeology*, “that trail is marked by superhuman devotion. We might call it ‘the Way of the Martyrs.’” Hewett concluded his paternalistic comments by noting that to Native people, the museum “must be to them a sanctuary.” Pueblo people’s memories of the 1680 Pueblo Revolt contradict Hewett’s naïve justification for the design of the auditorium.

Today, the museum is quite different from the institution that Hewett envisioned a century ago. His museum functioned more like an art center where works are for sale than a museum preserving New Mexico’s artistic heritage. Henri’s open-door policy is gone, and curators now make decisions about exhibitions. Looking back at this exhibition today, it is clear to me that Hewett and the European American artists instantaneously created an artistic canon based on outsider depictions of Pueblo lifeways. But we don’t understand those works in the same way as visitors did a century ago.

This past September, demonstrators protested the Santa Fe Fiesta and the Spanish Colonial version of the re-conquest of New Mexico in 1692, a celebration that Hewett revived. Protests against Fiesta have been increasing since the 1970s. They reminded us of the need to present unvarnished history, not popular New Mexico tales. Our obligation is to understand and preserve what Hewett created, but to do so by carefully explaining New Mexico history using St. Francis Auditorium and Beauregard’s Catholic murals as contradictory teaching aids. Our responsibility is to correct the inaccuracies embedded in conventional versions of the past, and provide sensitive explanations that reveal the complexity of life under Spanish, Mexican, and American versions of colonialism.

And as the first exhibition reveals, there is always more than one interpretation. ■

Joseph Traugott has written seven books on New Mexico art, including *The Art of New Mexico: How the West Is One* and *New Mexico Art Through Time: Prehistory to the Present*. He retired after eighteen years as curator of twentieth-century art at the New Mexico Museum of Art.