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Taos Moderns

New exhibition explores how trends in American Modernism merged in Taos, New Mexico

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In 1898, when a wheel on Bert Phillips' and Ernest Blumenschein's wagon broke near Taos, New Mexico, during a painting trip to the West, they stayed on to paint. Eventually they both settled there. An art colony began to develop as artists were attracted to the area through a complex web of interrelationships and influences. The Taos Society of Artists was founded in 1915. While most of its members kept to traditional painting of the landscape and the people, several were influenced by the ground-breaking *Armory Show* in New York in 1913, an exhibition that introduced European Modernism to America. European and American Modernism merged in Taos, prompting another burst in the town's creative output.

There were "big" names among the modernists such as Georgia O'Keeffe, John Marin, Marsden Hartley, and Andrew Dasburg. There were lesser known artists who studied in New York and San Francisco and at schools such as Black Mountain College near Asheville, North Carolina. Their work and their contributions to the tradition of American Modernism were significant but many have sunk into history.

Raymond Jonson (1891-1982) curated an exhibition at the University



Hilaire Hiler (1898-1966), *Red and Green Complementary Harmony*, 1956. Oil on paper, 11½ x 15½ in., signed and dated lower right: 'Hiler 1956'.



Hilaire Hiler (1898-1966), *Gray Shadow Series—Run*, 1956. Oil on paper, 11¾ x 16 in., signed and dated lower right: 'Hiler 1956'.



Emil Bistram (1895-1976), *Transcendental Abstraction*, 1937. Mixed media, encaustic on paper, 28 x 22 in., signed lower right.

Oli Sihvonen (1921–1991),
3 x 3 (Variant) 3 on Blues, ca. 1970s.
Oil on Masonite, 28 x 30¼ in.

of New Mexico in 1956 featuring a group of artists who became known as the Taos Moderns. The exhibition included the work of avant-garde Taos artists including Andrew Dasburg, Louise Ganthiers, Ward Lockwood, Agnes Martin, Robert Ray, Emil Bistram, Clay Spohn, John DePuy, Louis Ribak, Howard Cook, Ted Egri, Beatrice Mandelman, Thomas Benrimo, and others.

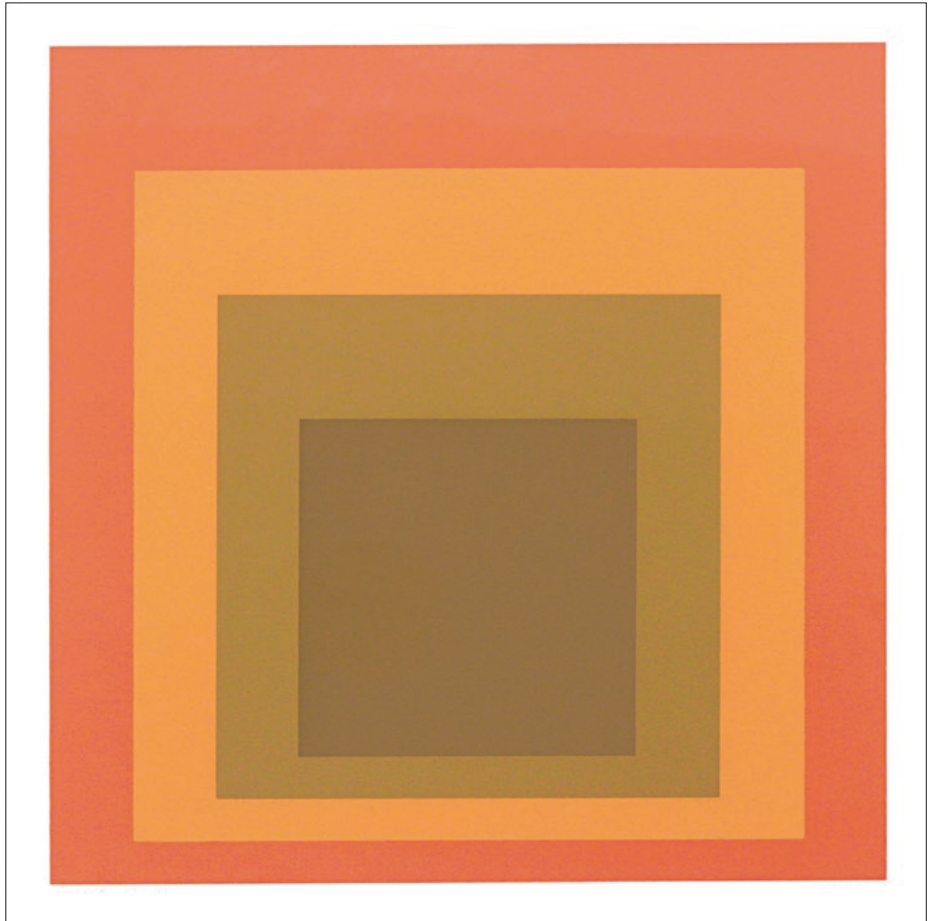
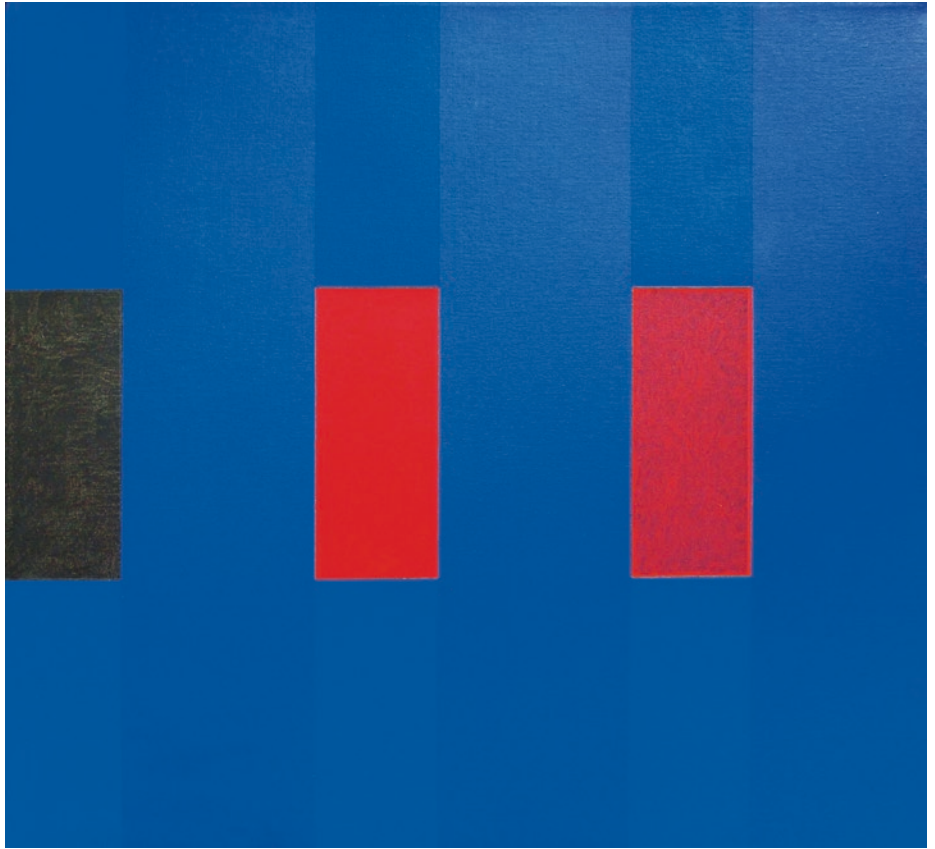
The new arrivals merged into the Taos art scene with its traditional painters and earlier modernists in a more supportive and open atmosphere than was often experienced in the bigger cities.

Andrew Dasburg (1887–1979) had been a student of Robert Henri, was an early exponent of Cubism, and his work had been included in the *Armory Show*. He visited Taos in 1918 at the invitation of Mabel Dodge. The landscape of Taos began to appear in his paintings in a block-like manner inspired by Cézanne, whose work he had discovered in Paris in 1910. He moved permanently to Taos in 1929.

Many of the artists were drawn to Taos, its environment, and its ever growing community of artists seeking the new, and they brought with them the influences of Europe and the burgeoning interest in a uniquely American art being advanced in the larger cities.

Not all of the artists chose to be part of a community. Thomas Benrimo (1887–1958) was strongly influenced by what he saw in the *Armory Show* and eventually gave up a commercial career to move to Taos to paint. “I work very much alone since I do not favor group action. I am inclined toward individual goals,” he wrote.

The extraordinary landscape of Taos was a constant influence on the artists regardless of their interest in



Josef Albers (1888–1976), *Concord*, from the portfolio *Die Oberfläche*, 1965. 12⅞ x 12⅞ in., ed. 88/120, signed ‘Albers ‘65’ lower right and titled and numbered ‘88/120’ lower left.



Left:
Thomas Benrimo (1887-1958),
Monolith, 1954. Oil on Masonite,
29½ x 40 in.

Below:
Louis Ribak (1902-1979), *Blue
Sky*. Oil on canvas, 57 x 41 in.,
signed lower right. Images courtesy
Addison Rowe Fine Art.



realism or abstraction. Benrimo wrote “abstract art departs from reality and nature only to draw far-reaching conclusions about reality. A legitimate abstract work of art can be produced only on the basis of a profound knowledge of nature.”

In 1944, Beatrice Mandelman (1912-1998) and Louis Ribak (1902-1979) moved to Taos from New York just as the city was becoming the focus of movements in modern art. They wanted to get away from the contentious supporters of social realism on one hand and of abstract expressionism on the other. Ribak’s mentor, John Sloan, who spent the summers painting in Santa Fe, thought the move might help his asthma. In 1947, Ribak founded the Taos Valley Art School where he encouraged his students not to have any ideology and to avoid becoming formal academics. One of his students was Oli Sihvonen (1921-1991).

Sihvonen was one of the 25 or so students who brought the influence of Black Mountain College to Taos. He followed the color theories of his mentor, the Bauhaus-trained Josef Albers (1888-1976) with whom he had studied from 1946 to 1948. Sihvonen remained true to Albers’ teachings throughout his career believing, as Albers taught, “Abstraction is the essential function of the human spirit.”

Addison Rowe Gallery in Santa Fe has assembled an exhibition of work by the Taos Moderns in an effort to bring it back into the light and to re-establish its place in the broader history of American Modernism. ■