



EDWARD WESTON (1886–1958), *Mabel Dodge Luhan*, 1933, gelatin silver print, 5 3/8 x 4 1/8 in., Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, © 1981, Arizona Board of Regents, 81.283.34



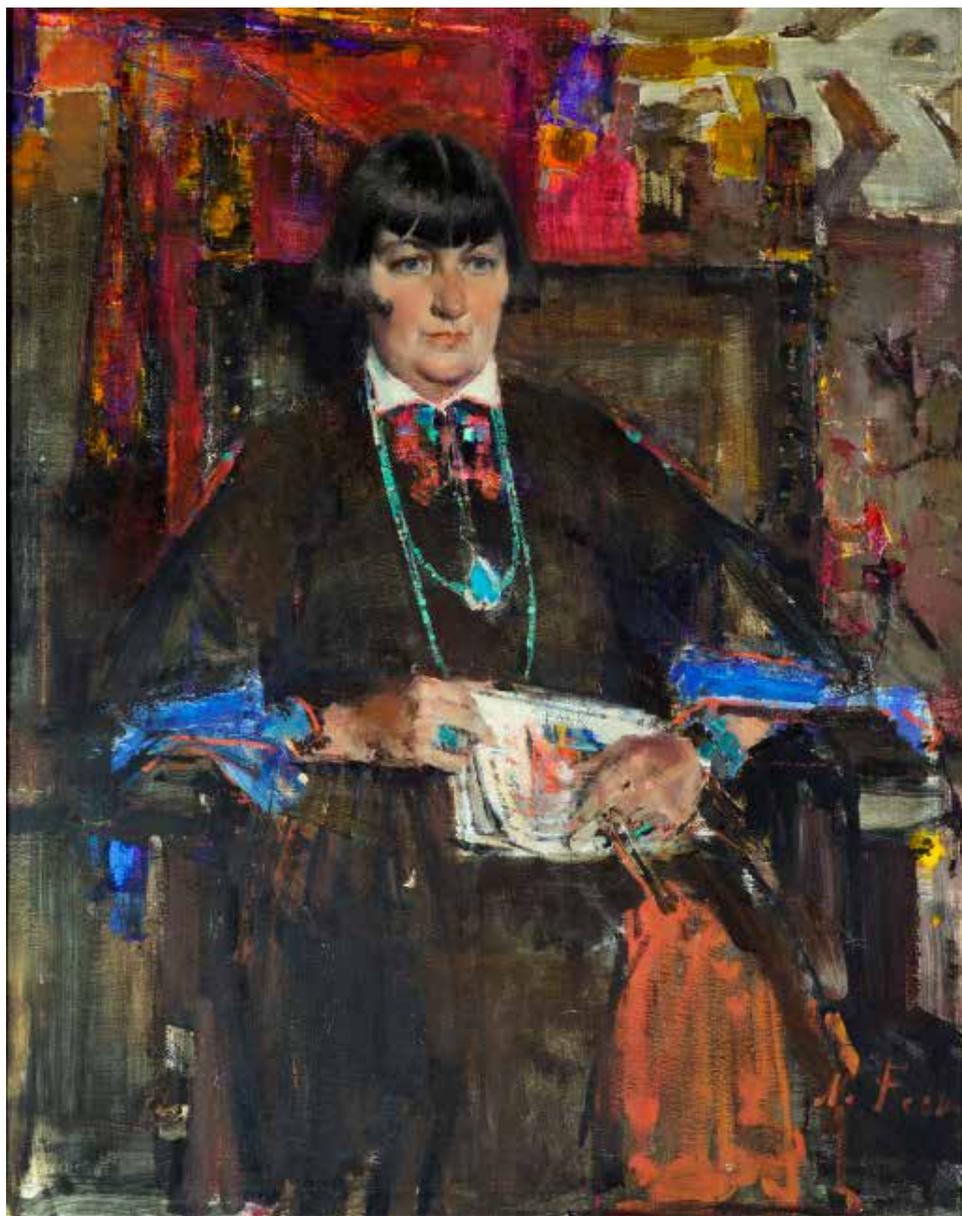
Mabel Dodge Luhan:
A FORCE
OF NATURE
FOR ART

In New Mexico, to drive from Santa Fe to Taos is to witness a spectrum of breathtaking visual phenomena, from sulfur-yellow cottonwood trees and striated canyons to fierce thunderstorms that tear through the arroyos, rendering the road impassable within minutes. In this dramatic landscape, Mabel Dodge Luhan (1879–1962) made history. A fascinating exhibition now on view in Taos, *Mabel Dodge Luhan & Company: American Moderns and the West*, highlights this woman and her profound influence on this country's artistic development. Organized by Taos's Harwood Museum of Art, the project extracts its heroine from the realm of myth and caricature in order to consider the complex web of relationships that she and other European-Americans developed with the Pueblo and Hispano peoples of New Mexico. Offering distinct yet interconnected perspectives, co-curators Lois P. Rudnick and MaLin Wilson-Powell examine the trajectory of Dodge's life and her complicated role in preserving and promoting New Mexican culture, as well as the resulting impact upon Anglo artists.

Dodge was a consummate connector; she founded artistic communities in Italy, New York City, and New Mexico that reinforced her own ambitions as a writer, social activist, and patron in the era when artists were beginning to define



MARSDEN HARTLEY (1877–1943), *Blessing the Melon: Indians Bring the Harvest to Christian Mary for Her Blessing*, c. 1918, oil on panel, 34 1/2 x 25 1/2 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art



NICOLAI FECHIN (1881–1955), *Mabel Dodge Luhan*, 1927, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 in., American Museum for Western Art—Anschutz Collection, Denver, photo: William J. O'Connor

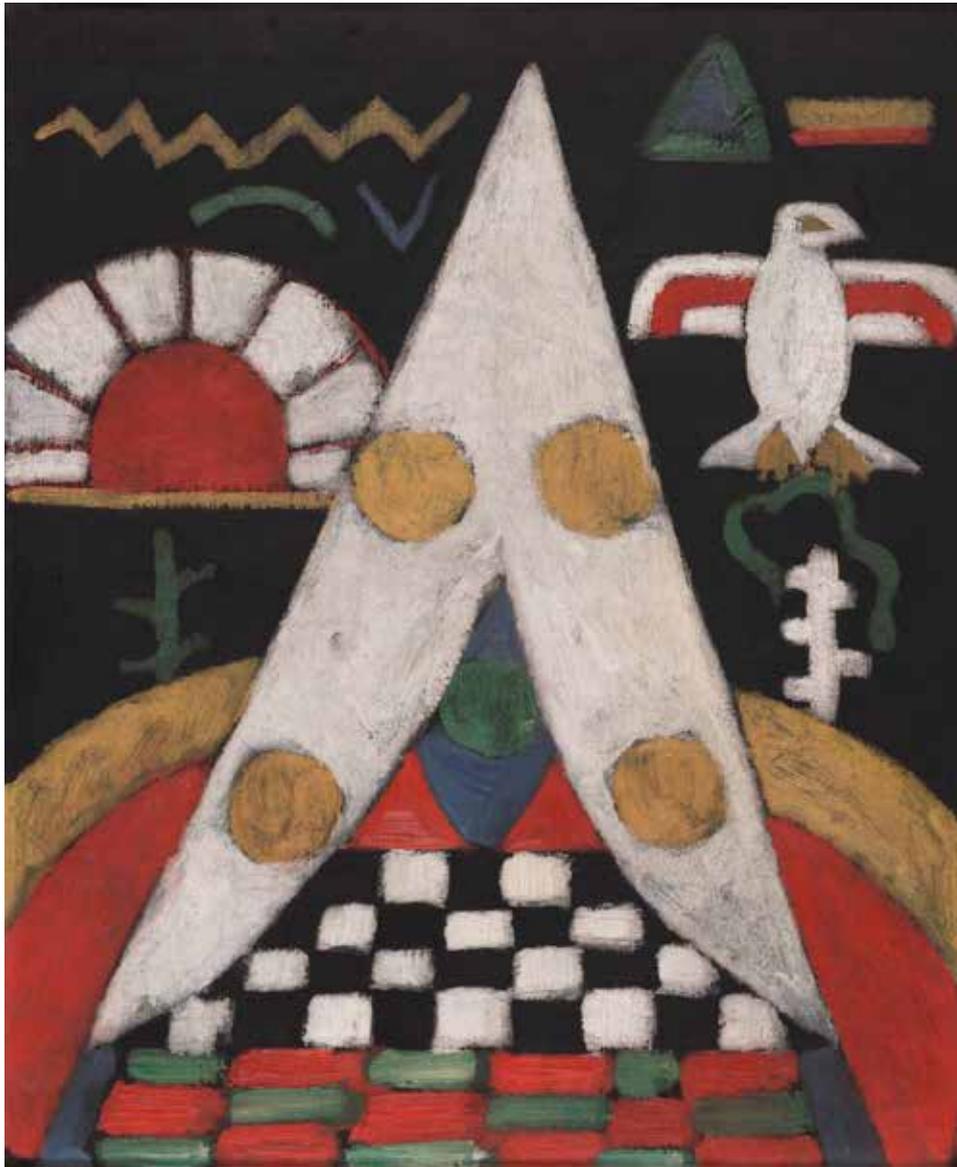
what is original about American art. Although she came from a privileged background, she had to summon enormous courage to repudiate societal expectations and create a life she believed to be more authentic and purposeful.

DAUGHTER OF THE GILDED AGE

Mabel Ganson was born in Buffalo in 1879, the year that the U.S. Congress passed a law allowing female attorneys to argue cases before the Supreme Court, and also the year that the writer Edith Wharton was formally “presented”

to Manhattan society at 17. Though she grew up with wealth and her own nursemaid, Mabel was impoverished emotionally, the only daughter of parents locked in an unhappy marriage. Her early life was shaped by the restrictive mores of the Gilded Age, when society women were all but prohibited from entering a profession or participating in civic life.

At 21, Mabel married Karl Evans and gave birth to her only child, John; much later, she would adopt a daughter, Elizabeth. She found the marriage stultifying, so after Karl died in a



MARSDEN HARTLEY (1877–1943), *An Abstract Arrangement of American Indian Symbols*, c. 1914-1915, oil on canvas, 20 1/2 x 17 1/2 in., Yale American Literature Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

she separated from Edwin, soon becoming a notorious ringleader of New York's burgeoning literary, political, and artistic life.

"Wednesday Evenings" at Mabel's 23 Fifth Avenue home featured animated debates on such topics as social reform, birth control, women's suffrage, workers' rights, and America's evolving cultural identity. Entering her salon in flowing dress, Mabel would toss out a topic for discussion, welcoming all comments and guests from all walks of life. Among them could be found reformers such as Margaret Sanger, Emma Goldman, and Max Eastman, and advocates of Freudian psychoanalysis like A.A. Brill. She developed a friendship with the muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens and accompanied her leftist lover, John Reed, to Texas before he joined Pancho Villa's revolutionary force in Mexico. In one of his dispatches to the *New York World*, Reed described her sartorial flamboyance en route: "With me in my bright yellow corduroy suit, and Mabel in her orange hat and satin-lined tiger-skin hunting jacket—with... an expense account, and a roll of blankets and 14 different kinds of pills and bandages... we shall descend upon El Paso."

In New York, Mabel became a patron of Alfred Stieglitz's next gallery, 291, the first U.S.

hunting accident, she set sail for Europe with her son. At sea she met Edwin Dodge, a Boston architect whom she reluctantly agreed to marry; he provided John with a father figure and Mabel with a life of luxury. In 1905, the year that Alfred Stieglitz opened his avant-garde Photo-Secession Gallery in New York City, the Dodges purchased the 15th-century Villa Curonia in Florence, filling it with Renaissance furnishings, Persian miniatures (some appear in the Harwood exhibition), tapestries, and a portrait of Mabel painted by the fashionable Parisian master Jacques-Émile Blanche. Over the next six years, the Dodges welcomed to their villa artists, writers, and intellectuals, including art historian Bernard Berenson, Gertrude and Leo Stein, journalist John Reed, writer Hutchins Hapgood, theater enthusiast Neith Boyce Hapgood, and photographer Carl Van Vechten. Their salon launched Mabel's identity as a fearless advocate of modern art and progressive causes.

In 1912, Gertrude Stein — a role model for Mabel's early salons — captured the striking visual juxtapositions she had observed in

Florence through her *Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia*. The Harwood exhibition includes a first-edition copy of this famous prose portrait, whose charming cover is wrapped in actual Florentine wallpaper. The following year, Dodge published the first major U.S. article about Stein, and also became one of two women cited as honorary vice presidents of the forward-looking 1913 Armory Show in New York, mainly because they provided financial support. That same year, the Dodges returned to America and an apartment in a brownstone house on the edge of Greenwich Village. Mabel decorated its rooms entirely in shades of white, as though she were unconsciously sweeping away the villa's suffocating opulence, which had, she wrote later, "become a frame that was more important than the contents." Shortly after their arrival in New York,

ANTONIO MOLLENO (1815–1845), *San Geronimo*, 1825, painted wood, 10 5/8 x 7 1/2 in., Harwood Museum of Art, Taos





venue to exhibit artworks by Picasso, Braque, and Duchamp alongside such Americans as Paul Strand, Georgia O’Keeffe, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, and Charles Demuth. She bought groundbreaking Cubist works by Andrew Dasburg and Max Weber, and supported struggling artists; during one of his dry spells, for example, Mabel provided lodging to the innovative stage designer Robert Edmond Jones. When the U.S. joined World War I in 1917, Mabel accompanied Reed to Paris, where she authored an article (on a subject relevant even today) for his journal, *The Masses*, titled “The Secret of War: The Look on the Face of Men Who have Been Killing and What Women Think About It.” She fled home to America, renting a farmhouse in Croton-on-Hudson (22 miles north of New York City), where she

underwrote a school of dance founded by Isadora Duncan’s sister, Elizabeth.

Ever restless, Mabel refused a proposal of marriage from Reed, officially divorced Edwin, and impetuously married the artist Maurice Sterne (1878–1957), who soon decamped to Santa Fe to establish a studio there. Awestruck by landscapes and indigenous cultures so unlike New York’s, he proposed his wife’s next cause: “Do you want an object in life? Save the Indians, their art—culture—reveal it to the world!” Once in New Mexico, Mabel wasted no time in Santa Fe (too civilized!), instead hiring a car to take her and Sterne 70 miles north to Taos. “My life broke in two right then” — she recalled in her memoir, *Edge of Taos Desert* — “and I entered into the second half, a new world that replaced all the ways that I had known with others,

ANSEL ADAMS (1902–1984), *A Man from Taos, Tony Lujan, Taos Pueblo* (from portfolio of 12 photographs, text by Mary Hunter Austin, San Francisco, Grabhorn Press), 1930, gelatin silver print, Harwood Museum of Art, Taos

more strange and terrible and sweet than any I had ever been able to imagine.” Within a month, she had rented a house and began inviting “movers and shakers,” the first being Dasburg, now cited as the “father” of modern art in Taos. Her guest register epitomizes an entire generation of creativity, including Frieda and D.H. Lawrence, Dorothy Brett, Willa Cather, Martha Graham, Agnes Pelton, John and Lucy Collier, Ansel Adams, and Georgia O’Keeffe. Most significantly, Mabel met Antonio (Tony) Lujan, the Taos Pueblo Indian who would become her life partner in creating a bridge between the Anglo and Pueblo cultures.



AGNES PELTON (1881–1961), *The Voice*, 1930, oil on canvas, 26 x 21 in., University Art Museum, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque

Mabel soon divorced Sterne and married Lujan. She adopted a revised spelling of his name (Luhan), lamenting that her Anglo friends could not pronounce it properly. Their home, *Los Gallos*, was located contiguous to Taos Pueblo and named for the ceramic roosters positioned on the roof above its portal. Here, over the next 40 years, Mabel and Tony (who never changed the spelling of his name) created something new. According to co-curator Lois P. Rudnick, “In New Mexico’s past they discovered their vision of the future: a world of individuals rooted in communities whose traditions were life-enhancing and, therefore, worth protecting and learning from.” Immersing herself in Tony’s world, and drawing inspiration from the Indian and Hispano artists all around, Mabel collected



REBECCA ("BECK") STRAND JAMES (1891–1968), *Song without Words (for Bill)*, 1929, reverse oil painting on glass, 12 x 9 7/8 x 11 1/2 in., Harwood Museum of Art, Taos

santos (painted images of saints) and Pueblo children's paintings, which she sent to New York for exhibition. She also organized the first show of Indian paintings for the New Mexico Museum of Art in Santa Fe.

Mabel's absorption and promotion of indigenous culture were not always beneficial, however. In the Harwood exhibition's catalogue, co-curator MaLin Wilson-Powell describes the extreme disparity that separated Mabel and the Anglo artists from the Pueblo communities: "For the TSA (Taos Society of Artists) painters, Pueblo Indians were exotic subjects they hired as models and posed with pottery, drums, moccasins, masks, and pipes — often unrelated to Taos Pueblo — as props for their painted tableaux. In 1917, when Mabel arrived in Taos, Taos Pueblo was known for its cultural richness and militancy, like all

the Pueblos of northern New Mexico, but the people were poor, with an average annual per capita income of \$30. While TSA models were paid 25 cents per hour and a large, beautiful Pueblo pot might sell for \$15, TSA canvases fetched anywhere from \$250 to \$2,000."

AUSPICIOUS CONNECTIONS

Aspects of this frank assessment are considered in the Harwood's revealing exhibition and catalogue, which feature an array of important artworks, artists, and photographs. To begin with just one example, Marsden Hartley (1877–1943) first visited New Mexico in 1918, but he had actually painted *An Abstract Arrangement of American Indian Symbols* three years earlier — in Berlin, no less. This early work from his *Amerika* series reflects an interest in both Germany's emerging Expressionist art and the Native

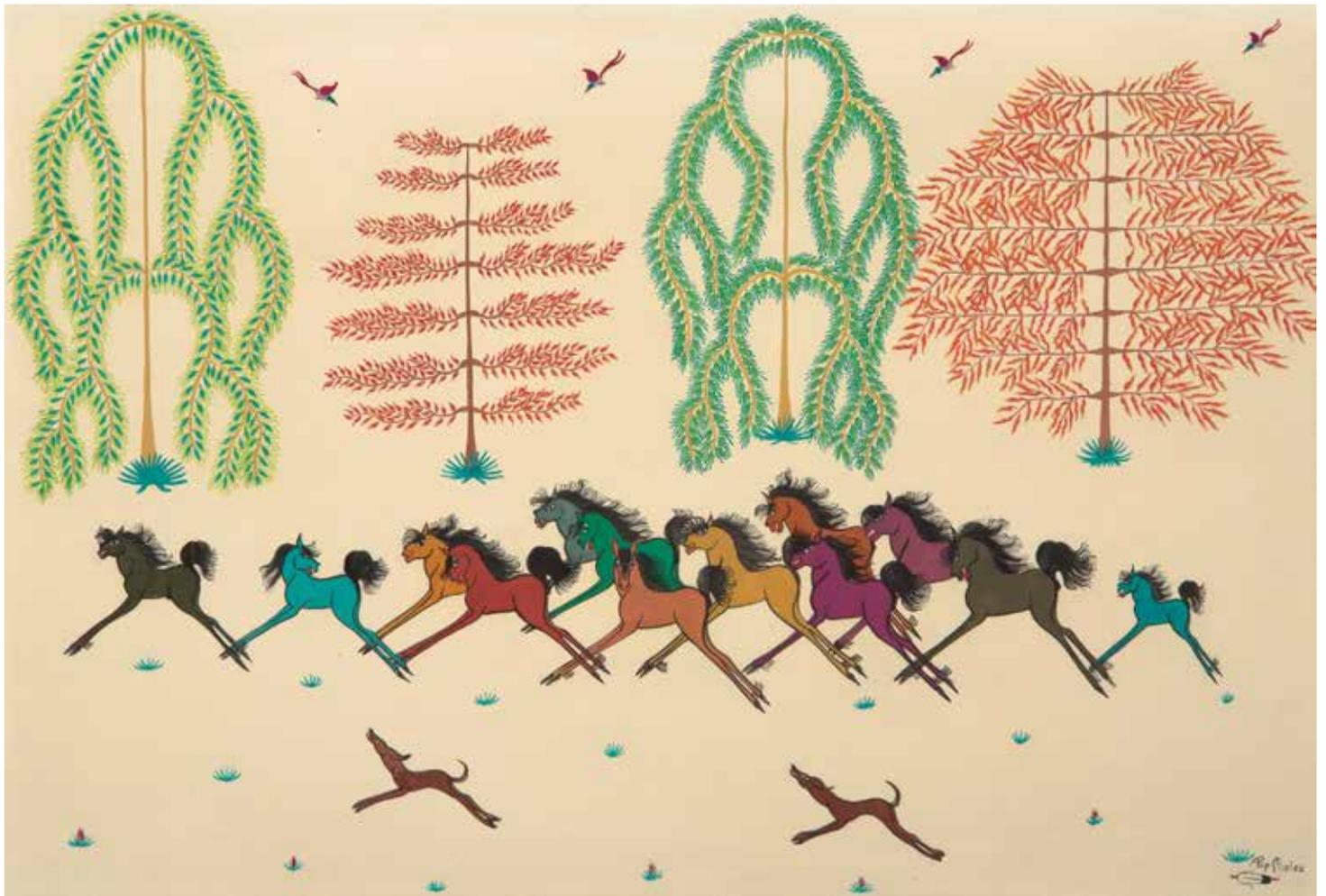
American artifacts he encountered, quite unexpectedly, on display at Berlin's Ethnographic Museum. At Mabel's invitation, Hartley later spent 15 months in Taos and Santa Fe interacting with Native people, studying their ceremonial dances and writing for national magazines about the authenticity of their art.

At *Los Gallos*, Hartley admired Mabel's collection of Hispano *santos* and *bultos* (carved sculptures) and painted three still lifes depicting them. MaLin Wilson-Powell notes that, in *Blessing the Melon: Indians Bring the Harvest to Christian Mary for Her Blessing*, "The central *bulto* wears an elaborate starburst corona that resembles the tin crowns used by the anonymous *santero* (santo painter) of Arroyo Hondo, a small village only 12 miles from Taos. The use of flattened and simplified drapery is a convention for framing saints that is derived from early reproductions that circulated in New Spain." Representative of Mabel's *santos* is the *San Geronimo* by Antonio Molleno (1815–1845), who was nicknamed the "Chili Painter" for his frequent use of red pigment and pepper-shaped motifs. Here, we see the relationship to Hartley's composition, which similarly places a holy figure in the center, symmetrically framed with decorative elements.

Even as Mabel bought *santos* and admirably (mis)identified them with modern art, her patronizing characterizations of Hispano culture instilled mistrust and pain among many locals. Catalogue essayist Carmella Padilla explains: "Luhan, the modern art maven, had no qualms about making an authoritative assessment of a tradition she knew little about; stylistically, the straightforward designs and flattened, two-dimensional perspectives that characterized the *santos* were akin to the abstracted flatness of modern art. But in fact, New Mexico's saint-making tradition was grounded in European forms and styles that were transplanted to the Americas with the Spanish conquest..."

In 1929, Ansel Adams (1902–1984) and his wife, Virginia, spent almost two months in New Mexico with Mabel's friend the writer Mary Hunter Austin. Through Tony's intercession, Adams was given rare permission to take pictures in the Taos Pueblo. Austin and Adams went on to produce *Taos Pueblo* (1930), the second portfolio containing his photographs, including the regal portrait *A Man from Taos, Tony Lujan, Taos Pueblo*. At *Los Gallos*, Adams met not only O'Keeffe but also Paul Strand (1890–1976), who showed him his 4 x 5 negatives. Had Mabel not provided the venue for this auspicious encounter, Adams might never have committed himself fully to photography. He wrote later, "My understanding of photography was crystallized that afternoon as I realized the great potential of the medium as an expressive art. I returned to San Francisco resolved that the camera, not the piano, would shape my destiny."

Both O'Keeffe (1887–1986) and Agnes Pelton (1881–1961) got to know New Mexico through Mabel's hospitality. While O'Keeffe settled in Abiquiú and became increasingly famous,



POP CHALEE (1906–1993), *My Wild Horses*, n.d., watercolor and pencil on paper, 13 x 19 in., Millicent Rogers Museum, Taos

Pelton moved to Cathedral City, California, and worked in relative obscurity. Like O’Keeffe, she had studied under Arthur Wesley Dow and exhibited in the Armory Show. An adherent of astrology and faith healing, she painted conventional landscapes to support herself. But her true calling was abstraction. In *The Voice* (1930), petal-like flames of pale yellow emerge from a molten red ember, reminiscent of O’Keeffe’s *Light Coming on the Plains, No. III*, made 12 years before. Pelton’s synthesis of sound and vision in this radiant work are in keeping with the philosophy of the Transcendental Painting Group, of which she became a member. Formed in Taos in 1938, it aimed to “carry painting beyond the appearance of the physical world, through new concepts of space, color, light, and design, to imaginative realms that are idealistic and spiritual.”

Song without Words (for Bill), a 1929 painting by Rebecca (“Beck”) Strand James (1891–1968), possesses a comparable otherworldliness as it symbolically represents music with

a glowing white flower. James, who was then married to Paul Strand, accompanied O’Keeffe on her first visit to Mabel’s. She is best remembered for reviving the folk tradition of reverse painting on glass in oils. This challenging technique requires constructing a painting in reverse; highlights are painted first, and words backward. Hartley had failed in his attempt to master it and warned James away from it; fortunately, she did not listen.

Born Merina Lujan, the artist Pop Chalee (1908–1993) was the daughter of a Taos Pueblo father (Tony Lujan’s older brother) and a Swiss mother. Encouraged by Mabel to become a painter, she was given the Tiwa name (which means Blue Flower) by her Taos grandmother. The watercolor *My Wild Horses* (date unknown) is representative of her whimsical interpretations of animal and forest scenes, which feature unusually delicate drawing and opaque jewel colors. Pop Chalee credited her use of peyote with enabling her to see colors in their purest form. Walt Disney once visited Santa Fe in an unsuccessful effort to recruit Indians to paint in his studio; before returning to California, he purchased one of Pop Chalee’s paintings.

BREAKING NEW GROUND

The true revelation of *Mabel Dodge Luhan & Company: American Moderns and the West*

will be in experiencing the artworks themselves, and in critically assessing the cross-fertilization that they demonstrate among Anglo, Pueblo, and Hispano cultures. Mabel Dodge Luhan, long recognized as a central force of influence within this milieu, will now be appreciated in much more nuanced ways. Like other women of her era who formed influential salons (e.g., Gertrude Stein, Madame C.J. Walker, and the Cone sisters of Baltimore), Mabel was a change-maker who carved out her own oasis in the high desert, even as she catalyzed relationships that inspired some of the most important works of modern art in America.

Rebecca Allan is a New York-based painter who writes on art.

Information: *Mabel Dodge Luhan & Company is on view at the Harwood, a unit of the University of New Mexico, from May 22 through September 11. It moves on to the Albuquerque Museum of Art and History (October 29, 2016–January 22, 2017) and finally the Burchfield Penney Art Center in Buffalo (March 10–May 28, 2017). For details, visit mabeldodgeluhan.org. The accompanying catalogue (Museum of New Mexico Press) contains contributions by the co-curators, as well as Carmella Padilla and Wanda Corn.*