

A Sense of Shelter

Mabel Dodge Luhan's Taos utopia still offers a welcome retreat for artists

Driving down busy Kit Carson Road in Taos, then heading left to the dead end of a narrow road called Morada Lane, a first-time guest can't anticipate what lies behind the mass of cottonwoods almost a century old. But cross under an archway and over a short wooden bridge spanning the Acequia Madre, and there lies the sprawling adobe complex that was arts patron Mabel Dodge Luhan's Taos nirvana beginning in 1918, then was just as famously inhabited by actor Dennis Hopper for much of the 1970s.

Mabel's House, as some locals call it, remains a place where creativity is the driving mission, modern distractions like television are nonexistent, and the occasional ghost has been said to frequent the master



Writer D.H. Lawrence and Dorothy Brett—a British artist who arrived at the Luhan house with Lawrence and his wife, then settled permanently in Taos—painted the windows in the second-story bathroom. Opposite: In 1928 Manuel Raina of Taos Pueblo carved this peacock out of Ponderosa pine for a door in what was the library.

bedroom. But the spirit of the custom-built structure has made it especially renowned for one thing: The effect it seems to have on everyone is “Welcome home.”

“There’s a real sense of a sheltering and nurturing space,” says Mabel’s biographer Lois Palken Rudnick. A former owner, Susan Chambers-Otero, says, “The land came from Pueblo people, and I think there was a very special energy there.” Adds Natalie Goldberg, a writer who has been leading workshops and retreats at the house of both Pueblo and European pedigree, “I hardly have to teach; people are so blown out by it and the land. It’s like coming home.”

Mabel herself thought the same about Taos when she arrived from New York City in early 1918: “Really, it seemed to me, I had never been happy before at all. ... ‘I am here,’ I thought, with exultant surprise,” she wrote in *Edge of Taos Desert*, the fourth volume of her memoirs. Very soon after, Mabel, who

was married at the time to artist Maurice Sterne, met Tony Lujan on one of her first visits to Taos Pueblo (he was also married, to a Taos Indian named Candelaria)—and realized she had seen Tony in a dream on a final night in New York. Together shortly thereafter, and then married until her death in 1962, they soaked up each other’s cultures and built a home that also became a retreat for social reformers and artists. With a legacy that has included three other owners, the Mabel Dodge Luhan House, despite some trying times, has retained its creative bones, both in structure and vocation—to be a sheltering space for people who want to find themselves in the secluded high plains while finding a voice to share with the world.

The new Taos resident was born to inherited wealth in Buffalo, New York, in 1879, but despite a strict Victorian upbringing, she liked to jettison convention. By the time she reached New Mexico, Mabel’s restlessness



Mabel Dodge Luhan's Taos compound sustained her vision to create a retreat for “the movers and shakers” of the earth.”

BOTTOM: CARL VAN VECHTEN/YALE COLLECTION OF AMERICAN LITERATURE, BEINECKE RARE BOOK AND MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY



Then at 17 rooms, the Big House might sound like something on the grand scale of the homes from Mabel's patrician background, but it was and remains eclectic, homey, and modestly sized in feel. The colors on the master bathroom windows painted by Lawrence and Brett were restored about ten years ago by a local artist. Although Brett received little recognition for her work during her lifetime, some of her paintings are now in the collection of the Harwood Museum of Art in Taos.

was manifest: She had married three times, given birth to a son, helped reconstruct a Medici-era villa in Florence, become vice president of New York's Armory Show of art, and published editorial pieces in newspapers and magazines. In the Italian villa and later her Greenwich Village apartment, she gained international fame as an organizer of salons, sometimes attracting about a hundred people once or twice a week.

"[Mabel] portrays herself as the eye of a fascinating storm and her home as a center for 'free speech' through which the various new ideas and practices that are aired will liberate herself and her fellow men and women from the shackles of the past," wrote Rudnick in the introduction to an edited *Intimate Memoirs*, Mabel's memoirs (Sunstone Press of Santa Fe has reprinted a new edition, avail-

able in December). Mabel herself has said, "I kept meeting more and more people, because in the first place I wanted to know everybody, and in the second place everybody wanted to know me." In Florence and New York, those people included Gertrude Stein, Marsden Hartley, Emma Goldman, Alfred Stieglitz, and Walter Lippmann.

In Taos, where one of the notables, D.H. Lawrence, stayed only a few months but wrote prolific poetry and essays, Mabel refined a vision of her house as salon in a letter to a friend: It would be a retreat for "the movers and shakers" of the earth...to relax and recover their energy...the scientists, artists, statesmen, creators, promoters of values and changers of the world..." Guests stayed a few days to many months, some laboring on important life works. From Carl

Jung and Jean Toomer to Martha Graham and Ansel Adams, reformers, writers, and artists alike flocked to Mabel's House and the town where in 1915 the Taos Society of Artists had already been founded. "This is the provocative landscape that stirs the emotions," romanticized Mabel in her 1947 book *Taos and Its Artists*.

The house was the first project for Tony and Mabel. In May 1918 Tony encouraged Mabel to buy the then-150-year-old adobe house on 12 acres adjacent to the pueblo—and stunning views of Taos Mountain, with only meadows between. She paid \$1,500. To the existing four or five rooms, the couple added another dozen over the next decade, with Tony laying out each one's footprint in sticks and string, then supervising the crew. Three floors on one wing, topped with a



The double bed in Mabel's second-story room—with a backdrop of Taos Mountain foothills—is the only piece of original furniture to have survived through all owners (it was built in the room and is too massive for anyone to remove). Manuel Raina carved the bedposts, which echo the Salomonic (spiraled-shaft) columns in the living room. The columns were carved by Luhan neighbor Ralph Meyers and are among a number of beautiful details in the house handmade by local craftsmen.

solarium, imitated the stacked adobes of Taos Pueblo. The high ceilings of the living room, called the Big Room, along with details in the dining room reflected Mabel's love of European design while the rooms themselves still conformed to Spanish and Pueblo flavors (it was the first or second Pueblo-Revival-style home in Taos), with kivas, latillas, and projecting roof beams.

Money was really no object, as Mabel's mother supplemented her sizable inheritance to support not only the house but also extended travels to escape Taos's remoteness. Her mother also financed the building of a mansion in nearby Ranchos de Taos for her grandson, John, which Mabel in 1936 donated to Taos County for its first hospital. The heiress's "to the manor born" background was also reflected in the other New

Mexico properties she built, including five guesthouses and a river house at Embudo—a whitewashed cabin at the confluence of two tributaries that permitted weary travelers from Santa Fe to rest a few days before continuing up the gorge to Taos.

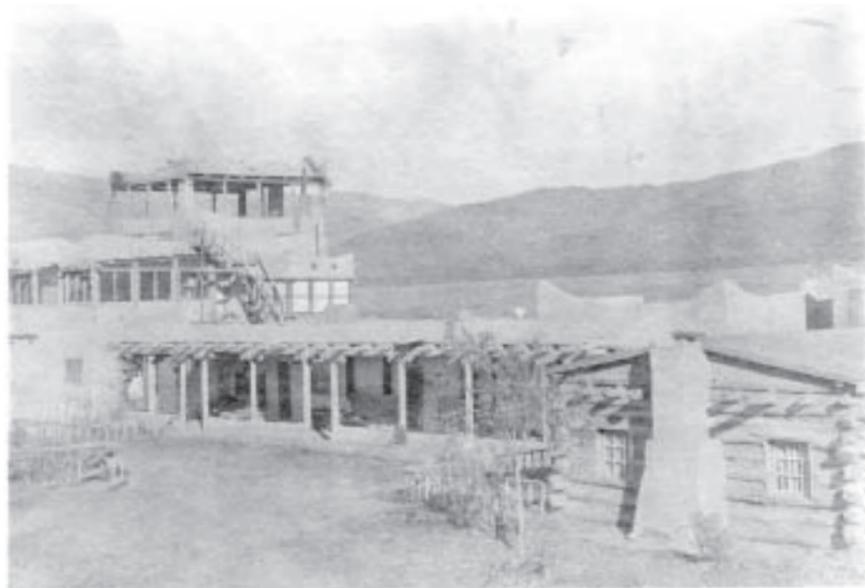
By the end of the 1920s, says Rudnick in *Utopian Vistas: The Mabel Dodge Luhan House and the American Counterculture*, the Big House (also known as Los Gallos because of Mabel's still-existing collection of ceramic chickens—and one new clay rooster—that watch visitors from the flat roof of the main portal) spanned about 8,400 square feet, and the compound included barns, gardens, corrals, and a gatehouse for a few servants (mostly from the pueblo).

Dozens of friends and creative types used the rambling complex as a retreat. Painter

Andrew Dasburg became known as the father of modern art in New Mexico after his winters at Los Gallos. Willa Cather secluded herself on the property for parts of two summers; her lover thought she fashioned the character of Eusabio in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* after Tony. John Collier learned about Taos Pueblo Indians there and, later, as Commissioner of Indian Affairs under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, created the federal Indian New Deal, which worked to restore culture and heritage.

Mabel also supported Native artists in part by joining Mary Austin, Alice Henderson, Dasburg, and others to establish the Indian Arts Fund, whose purpose was reviving Indian arts and crafts and educating other Americans about them.

D.H. Lawrence and his wife, Frieda, arrived



Top left: Tony Lujan (Mabel anglicized her spelling of their last name), of whom Mabel wrote, "He seems like a rock; more than that, a mountain...". Right: An early view of Los Gallos shows the attached log cabin built for Mabel's son, John (who didn't like Pueblo style). Part of it has since been covered in stucco. Bottom: The Mabel Dodge Luhan House today. Santa Fe writer Natalie Goldberg started teaching there two decades ago and recently spent two weeks at the house working on her new book, *Old Friend from Far Away: The Practice of Writing Memoir*. "It's so quiet, and there's a groundedness," she says. "You can feel it in the walls." Thankful for the creativity Mabel inspired, Goldberg leaves a small stone at her grave in Kit Carson Cemetery after each workshop.

TOP RIGHT: ALAN SYLLS; TOP ROW: YALE COLLECTION OF AMERICAN LITERATURE, BEINECKE RARE BOOK AND MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY



Left: The Rainbow Room (Mabel's favorite for reading and writing) was named for the herringbone latillas that she had stained in a spectrum of colors. Below: In the dining room Mabel painted the latillas in earth-based pigments of black, white, and red to resemble an Indian blanket. Santa Fe painter William Penhallow Henderson made the floor tiles. Opposite: Dovecotes built for Mabel to house pigeons, the species still in residence.

in September 1922 and kept coming and going. His projects around the compound included decoratively painting the windows of Mabel's glassed-in second-story bathroom with artist Dorothy Brett—a British-born painter who had come to New Mexico with the Lawrences—after being scandalized that people could see in. (Taos' first indoor plumbing supposedly occasioned locals to line up on pueblo land to get a look.) Mabel, who wanted D.H. to validate her Taos vision and had hoped to “possess his soul,” she once said, wrote a biography of him called *Lorenzo in Taos* and gave the couple a ranch north of Taos (where an altar in a small chapel supposedly incorporates his ashes). To reciprocate, Frieda—born von Richthofen, a distant cousin of the famed Red Baron—gave Mabel the manuscript of D.H.'s novel *Sons and Lovers*.

When Mabel died in August 1962, and within a year, when Tony followed, it marked the end of an era. But the creative visions lived on. The house sold in 1970 to Dennis Hopper, who said he first saw it while filming *Easy Rider*. Rudnick considers Hopper and Mabel kindred spirits of sorts, as both were part of generations escaping “mainstream American culture.” At what Rudnick calls his “studio-cum-commune,” the actor began a new artistic era by bringing his editing crew for *The Last Movie*. Later his “movers and shakers” included Bo Diddley, Michelle Phillips (whom he married in the solarium), Jack Nicholson, and George McGovern—plus visits from Mabel's early guests Georgia O'Keeffe and Dorothy Brett.

But the end of the 1970s had become careless times for the place Hopper had renamed the Mud Palace. By the time he sold it in 1977, having rented rooms to hippies, parts of the house were in such disrepair that the restoration projects filled three years of 18-hour days for new owner George Otero. His second wife, Susan, secured National Historic Landmark status for the house. “It was the first place to make



a major contribution in the 20th century from a woman's home,” she says, “and the first woman's home to be so honored.” George, a leader in the then-emerging field of diversity training in education, started a nonprofit there called Las Palomas de Taos, which welcomed more than 50,000 people to workshops at Mabel's House.

Thus began the modern metamorphosis. In 1996 the Attiyeh Foundation, a private family nonprofit that preserves historic and natural sites, purchased the house. So far the group has spent well over half a million



dollars in restorations and upgrades. The foundation continues the bed-and-breakfast (with each guestroom named after a famous visitor of Mabel's and Tony's) and also the workshops by writers, artists, and spiritual practitioners that the Oteros had begun.

The legacy of creativity is undeniable. As a visitor today wanders the grounds with the smell of a New Mexico fall in the air from piñon burning in the fireplaces, a feeling of homecoming is palpable. It was that way to Mabel and her guests—D.H. Lawrence wrote, “I think New Mexico was the greatest experience from the outside world that I have ever had. It certainly changed me forever....In the magnificent fierce morning of New Mexico one sprang awake, a new part of the soul woke up suddenly, and the old world gave way to a new”—and that same spirit exists today, echoing through rooms redolent with history. ❁