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In Memoriam

Dr. Robert Rankin White (1942-2014)



Steve Watson

Robert Rankin White, preeminent southwestern art historian and author, passed away in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on 17 July 2014. Born in Houston, Texas, on 8 February 1942, he graduated from the prestigious St. Stephen's Episcopal School in Austin in 1960. He received a bachelor's degree in geology from the University of Texas in 1964, served in the U.S. Army in Vietnam, and completed a master's degree in hydrology from the University of Arizona in 1971. After a two-year stint in Texas, Robert worked for the U.S. Geological Survey in New Mexico as a hydrologist and editor for the next fifteen years. He then obtained his doctorate in American Studies at the University of New Mexico (UNM) in 1993. During the course of his career, Robert authored or co-authored over fifty books, articles, chapters, and essays in history and the arts.



Robert left many references to his intellectual origins and to how his two passions of art and history merged. He was influenced by his father, who completed a bachelor's degree in history before going on to a career in engineering.

STEVE WATSON received his MA in history from UNM in 1995, and is the archivist for the Air Force Operational Test and Evaluation Center's History Office at Kirtland Air Force Base, New Mexico. He is currently working on a biography of the base's namesake, Col. Roy C. Kirtland, and a study of the contribution the first Army pilots made to the establishment of a separate Air Service. He is on the advisory board of the First Aero Squadron Foundation, a member of the Historical Society of New Mexico, and was Robert White's friend since the mid-1980s.

His grandparents owned an E. Martin Hennings painting of New Mexico, which launched his curiosity about the Land of Enchantment. Later, in Arizona, he happened on another painting by the same artist. As he recalled in 1978, “I then determined to learn all that I could about this man.”¹ As a student at the University of Texas, Robert took a history elective from Dr. George Arnakis—“For the first time in my college career, I felt that I was in the presence of a true scholar”—and briefly considered changing his major.² While stationed at Sandia Base in Albuquerque in 1967–1968, he took a UNM Continuing Education course in the history of the American West that, he later noted, “reawakened my interest in history.”³ He honed his skills by studying the “meticulous research” and “lucid writing style” of the works of Robert Taft, a chemistry professor and art historian.⁴ First traveling through and later living in New Mexico, he and his first wife, Judy, toured historical sites, galleries, and museums in the early 1970s. Robert found his niche in the study of northern New Mexico artists, and developed a passion for New Mexican and southwestern history from the territorial period through the early twentieth century. Indeed, Robert considered the representational art of this time to be “a window onto the past.”⁵

A scant two years after finishing his master’s degree in hydrology, Robert began his “conversion on the road to Taos.”⁶ Although there had been previous works on the Taos artists and Hennings, in 1973 at the suggestion of a Santa Fe art dealer, Robert went directly to speak with Martin Hennings’s widow. Robert charmed her into divulging previously unknown stories.⁷ Four months later, he sent his manuscript, “Taos Founder, E. Martin Hennings,” to *Southwest Art* and became a published art historian. Just three years later he had his first major piece, “The Lithographs and Etchings of E. Martin Hennings, 1886–1956,” published by the Museum of New Mexico Press.

Robert’s methodology and style emphasized accuracy, thoroughness, and humor. As a researcher, Robert was intensely persistent. He explained, “On a number of occasions, I became interested in a certain subject but finding little or nothing available in the literature, began my own research; by the time my curiosity was satisfied I had gathered enough information to write an article or book on that particular person or event.”⁸ In 1993 he tracked down the exact location where the founders of the Taos Society of Artists, Bert Geer Phillips and Ernest Blumenschein, wrecked their wagon in 1898 and experienced the light of northern New Mexico—the so-called “Sacred Site.” Robert liked to lace his writing with humor. In an article on etchings and James McNeill Whistler, Robert recounted an incident in which an artist died before being able to deliver two etchings, whereupon Whistler agreed to fulfill the man’s agreement. Robert wrote, “Our sympathies to the poor Mr. Luard, but for the sake of future generations of art-lovers, his death could not have been more timely.”⁹

In the early 1980s, Robert turned to more traditional historical and biographical topics, as well as to the history of New Mexican literature and architecture. His outside work sustained his passion, but he also found a way to commingle the two interests by producing an article on a U.S. Geological Survey employee murdered in New Mexico. Robert produced *The Taos Society of Artists*, arguably his best-known work, during this early period. Published by UNM Press in 1983, the book consisted of the meeting minutes and other documents from the Taos Society. In the process, Robert dispelled misconceptions and presumptions, and explained internal dissent among the artists. The effort earned him praise as a superb researcher and fully established him as a respected art historian.

Robert left his job at the Geological Survey in 1989 to become an independent scholar and author. He had begun his doctoral education at the UNM Department of History in the early 1980s, but later transferred to the American Studies department, where he completed his dissertation, "Artists of Territorial New Mexico, 1846–1912" (1993). Afterward, he wrote two chapters of *Bert Geer Phillips and the Taos Art Colony*, co-authored with Julie Schimmel, in 1994. In high demand as a lecturer on territorial New Mexican art, Robert spoke extensively at art conferences across the nation, and gallery owners, private art collectors, and museum curators sought his expertise. In 1998 UNM Press reissued *The Taos Society of Artists* with a preface that updated much of the existing scholarship on the Society.

Robert participated in numerous cultural organizations including the Southwest Art History Council, the Western History Association, the Westerners, and the Santa Fe Trail Association. In 1995 he became the Executive Director of the New Mexico Book League, publisher of the literary newsletter *Book Talk*, until the publication ended in October 2001. He served on the board of the Friends of the UNM Libraries in the 1980s and the Editorial Board of the *New Mexico Historical Review* from 1990 through early 1998. He was an active member of the Historical Society of New Mexico, serving on its Board of Directors beginning in 1987, and as its President from 1991–1993.

Robert's personal journals from 1974 to 2006 and periodic travel journals from the 1960s and 1970s are now part of his collection donated to the UNM Center for Southwest Research. These journals are a rich trove of information regarding the cultural life of New Mexico for that period, and his writing sparkles with references to his interactions with the luminaries of the time. Additionally, the collection contains his personal papers, manuscripts, research notes, and historical documents.

Robert's life intersected with art, history, and literature, as well as music, publishing, and travel. He lived at a time in New Mexico when it was possible to befriend or at least have more than a passing nod with many—if not most—of

those folks who created and celebrated its culture and those who preserved it. His affable, charming nature introduced him to these circles, but his sharp intellect, competence, strength of character, and desire to serve and contribute kept him well connected with the movers and shakers in them.

Sadly, Robert was afflicted with severe and prolonged tinnitus beginning in November 2000, and some years later, he developed Parkinson's disease. Along with dementia, the disease's symptoms effectively ended his ability to research and write. Complications from Parkinson's eventually took Robert's life. He is survived by his sister and brother-in-law, Eleanor and Richard Viebig of Houston, Texas, and nieces Peggi Bloomquist and Tracy Broyles, as well as numerous friends, neighbors, colleagues, and caregivers. Robert was interred at the Houston National Cemetery in Texas in late July 2014, and a Celebration and Remembrance of his life took place at his home in late August 2014. He will long be remembered as a loyal friend, dedicated servant, and outstanding scholar.

Select and Chronological Bibliography of Major Works

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"Felix Martinez: A Borderlands Success Story." *El Palacio* 87 (winter 1981–1982): 12–17.

The Taos Society of Artists. 1983. Rev. ed., Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998.

"Ernest Blumenschein and the Great War." *Ayer y Hoy en Taos* 2 (winter 1986): 3–6.

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"A 1910 Albuquerque Bungalow with an Alvarado Dormer Window." *New Mexico Architecture* 28 (May/June 1987): 7.

"The Murder of Colonel Charles Potter." *New Mexico Historical Review* 62 (July 1987): 249–62.

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New Mexican Genízaros and Turkish Janissaries. Albuquerque, N.Mex.: Las Lomas Press, 1994.

"Sacred Site." *Southwest Art* 23 (May 1994): 60–66, 100.

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"A Remembrance of Peggy Pond Church," *Book Talk* 23 (September 1994): 4–6.

"Gene Kloss, a Taos Printmaker." *Gilcrease Journal* 4 (fall/winter 1996): 44–52.

"Jeno Juszko's Statue of Archbishop Lamy." *Tradición Revista* 6 (summer 2001): 63–66.

Notes

1. Robert Rankin White, *The Lithographs and Etchings of E. Martin Hennings* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1978), author's preface, inside front cover.

2. Robert Rankin White, *New Mexican Genízaros and Turkish Janissaries* (Albuquerque, N.Mex.: Las Lomas Press, 1994), iii–iv.

3. *Ibid.*, iv.

4. Robert Rankin White, "Artists of Territorial New Mexico, 1846–1912" (PhD diss., University of New Mexico, 1993), v.

5. *Ibid.*, 220.

6. *Ibid.*, vi.

7. Travel notes, 22 September 1973, Box 1, Robert R. White Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico [hereafter CSWR, UNM].

8. "White, Robert Rankin," *Contemporary Authors*, vol. 123 (1988), 465, in Biographical Information folder, Box 3, Robert R. White Papers, CSWR, UNM.

9. "Whistler and the Junior Etching Club," *Print Review* 4 (1975): 38–39.

