

An artist looks at architecture

by Harriet Kimbro

In 1898 two artists made their way to Taos and began a three-quarter century love affair between art and New Mexico — including its architecture. One of those men was E. L. Blumenschein, who fifty years later had the honor, in his words, of contributing a “few words of praise from the artist’s angle,” in a program honoring John Gaw Meem, FAIA.

In the course of researching materials by and about Blumenschein for his daughter, toward potential publication of a book about her father, his comments in 1953 about Meem came to light. They seem to have much to say today and reinforce our perspective on the course of architecture and history in New Mexico.

In checking with Mr. Meem on publication of this material, he was quite pleased, commenting himself that “few people nowadays remember Blumy’s delightful and whimsical humor.”

“Blumy’s” comments about Meem follow:

The honor of appearing on this program is much appreciated and I am very happy to contribute a few words of praise from the artist’s angle. I was once asked to speak at an artist friend’s funeral. I knew the man so intimately that I fear some of my sentences and remarks gave the wrong impression to my audience. Yet I knew I was safe. This artist could not rise from his coffin and “sock me one.”

But this afternoon I realize that I must be careful. You see, I disagree considerably with Meem’s point of view. In a sort of complimentary ridicule I call him the Benvenuto Cellini of the T-square. The T-square can only draw straight lines, and Cellini could only give forth curves.

This fact did not interfere with somewhat similar results, for both men achieved beauty through exceedingly accomplished craftsmanship. I respect craftsmanship — but do not place it in a category with great imaginative and dramatic design. In dramatic design the artist must, of course, have able craftsmanship, but he also, in certain sections of his building or picture, must sacrifice his perfection of technique and produce irregularities that are necessary to give the emotional effect. I have not time to go into this, except to remark that Meem’s architecture seems to insist on perfection of technique much more than it tries for an emotional appeal.

Now I will endeavor to prove this conclusion of mine — not only to you but to myself. My Gods of Art used the big dramatic styles — Shakespeare, Michaelangelo, El Greco, Beethoven, Bach and a dozen others in music and in architecture, the wonderful architects and great sculptors who executed the Gothic churches.

Let me go back in our New Mexican story to about 1910, when in Taos the merchants were inducing the native Spanish Americans to cover their adobe walls with tin — large sheets of tin indented



E. L. Blumenschein. Photograph taken about 1923; courtesy of Helen G. Blumenschein.

to imitate stone masonry — and also to place a sloping tin roof on the church at Ranchos de Taos. I believe it was right then that the artists and writers started something that developed way beyond our control, the preservation of the Spanish-Pueblo style in New Mexico. It seemed the right thing to do at that moment.

We raised money to restore the flat dirt roof on the church, and used all means in our power to prove to the people of our neighborhood the value to them of this handbuilt style of architecture. We succeeded in Taos, then carried our campaign to Santa Fe. The powers there recommended to all the necessity of preserving the character of the city. It was taken up more on an economic basis than from any love or admiration of the crude-looking but comfortable homes of the early inhabitants. The money-grabbing merchant traders came close to ruining the picturesque charm of Taos. We never considered Spanish homes, or five-storied communal Indian buildings, as architecture. And we were all much surprised when gradually, by public opinion, the “Spanish-Pueblo Style of Architecture” was being adopted by the entire state, as not only practical and fitting but, most of all, an attractive drawing card to visitors.

In those days I was a successful illustrator and

had money enough to buy twelve volumes of the Century Dictionary. Before I decided to call the Pueblo style architecture, something that is surely related to the high arts, I got down Volume A of my Dictionary. Here are a few quotations from the definition:

"Architecture — the art of building; specifically of fine or beautiful buildings. In the widest sense, the principle of design and ornament as applied to building. The practice of this art requires skill in design which is the special province of the architect, and skill in execution which is the special province of the workmen, whom the architect directs. Architecture is properly distinguished from mere building by the presence of the decorative or artistic element."

A number of years later, Frank Lloyd Wright, noted American architect, was quoted by Walter Ufer as saying, "Outside the mission churches built by the padres, there is no architecture in New Mexico."

My own ideas were always that the skilled architect was the only one who could create architecture and of course the most gifted architects in Spain designed the superb missions. The early Catholic fathers were steeped in this awe-producing style and gave our Southwest and California some beautiful works, churches of not only beauty but with *drama* and *emotional power*. I want to stress this last point, which I find missing in most adaptations of the architecture of the Spanish Pueblo style — or if not missing, overshadowed by the strict excellence of the execution.

Now let us get back to our history, for it is about this period that I first heard of Meem. He proved to be a valuable asset to New Mexico. Meem mastered the Pueblo style, going deeply into the ethnological side. He was the most skilled architect I have

known in our state, and as the demand was great he soon gave us his many versions of homes and churches.

Before Meem came to us and even after, the painters in New Mexico (by that time very well known throughout the United States) learned to appreciate the artistic, often dramatic result of the Spanish American inaccuracies in all of their buildings. But the "picturesque charm" disappeared — the uneven lines of the silhouette, the bulges in the walls, the lovely color that straw gave to the mud walls, the delightful buttresses of uneven contour and wobbly form, the leaky flat roofs covered with a foot of dirt, the handmade patios with refreshing white walls, the homemade corbels, the ceilings with badly matched pine vigas and velvety skinned aspen poles (herringbone style). All these attractive and unusual features were supplanted for the first time by "architecture."

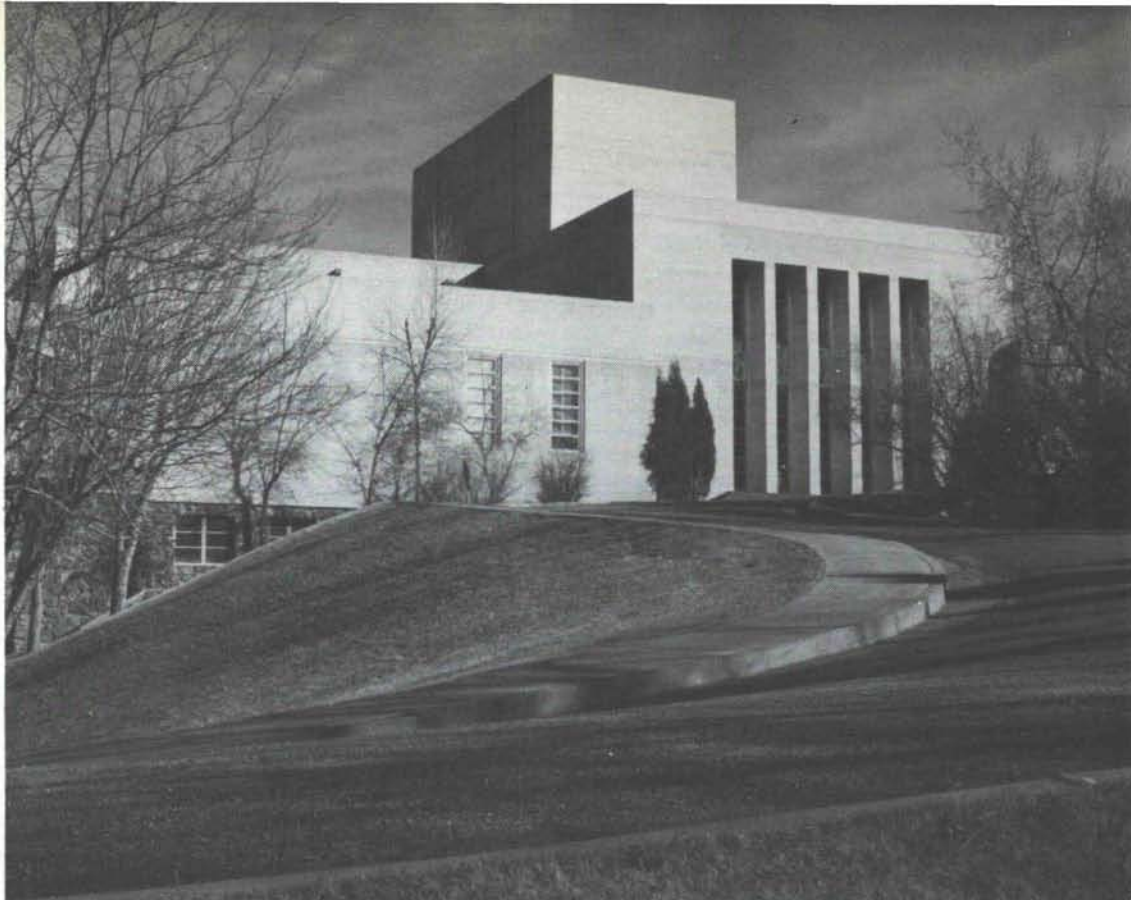
This meant to us, in Taos, that the lines were painfully straightened, the walls flat colorless cement, the buttresses were no more necessary to hold up the home or chapel, and of course the roof never leaked, and bed sheets were not needed to be tacked up on the vigas of the ceiling to prevent the old dirt roof from affectionately contributing to the daily meal. The fascinating adobe epoch was ended: no more depth of colors in the shadow, no more scintillation in the sunspots, no more melodrama in the clumsy execution. The loving home-making hand that patted on the plaster was exchanged for a trowel of cement.

All the faults of adobe building were replaced by civilization's high class architect with better proportions, rigorous academic construction, and the special good taste of John Meem. It is the old story, sad at the same time but forgotten in a generation or two, of

The
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how the conqueror destroys the arts of the conquered to have them pop up again in modern dress. In the place of picturesque we have learned to appreciate the elegant, and to know that strict order is better than "sloppy" artistry. Meem's great influence has lifted us up quite a few steps in appreciation of art.

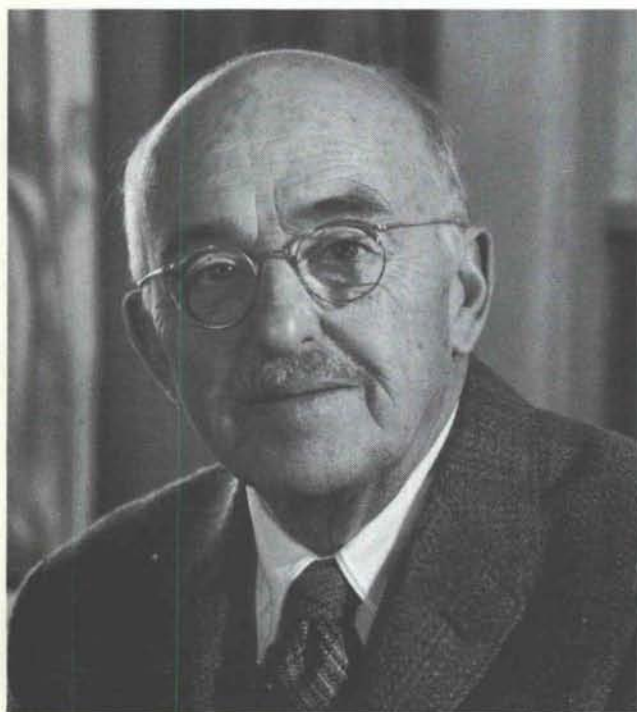
It seems that he had a greater success in Colorado Springs. And here is where I "cave in" and acknowl-

edge that out of the faultless, almost mechanically correct execution, out of straight line atop of other straight lines, he has achieved his masterpiece. And it is a Beauty!!

All of the artists acclaim the Colorado Art Center. It is impossible to describe, to use words that could make you imagine this lovely building. Lovely gives the wrong impression. There is no sentimental appeal. To me the Art Center structure is conceived in the modern spirit, influenced slightly by the Pueblo style. But all this is forgotten, as one responds to the unusual elegance resulting from his stiff correctness.

No doubt his proportions are the big secret of a splendid job, in which he stamped the name of John Gaw Meem, his cultivated taste and extraordinary skill on a monument that elevates our minds and inspires our work. In that, I feel the elegant personal qualities of a big man, big enough to use his material, gathered from the Pueblo and modern styles — and forget it all, as he created a beautiful symphony in which art of high class is the main feature. And art of a high class is everlastingly an elevating quality to all men and women.

These comments are edited from those presented June 13, 1953, for the Women's Board of the Museum of New Mexico in Santa Fe. Blumenschein, Meem and Gustave Baumann were the only living Fellows in the field of Fine Arts of the School of American Research, according to an article at the time in the Taos newspaper, *El Crepusculo*. Blumenschein's original handwritten manuscript is in the archives of the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe. H. K.



John Gaw Meem. A photograph by Laura Gilpin.