

Taos art market: It ain't what it used to be

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Reviving *el corazón* : Part two of a series

Art. It might be the thing that defines Taos on an international level.

And as a community, Taos continues to attract creative souls and enjoy an expressive culture of museums, galleries and artists of every ilk.

But ask longtime gallery owner Stephen Parks, and he'll tell you the Taos art market (and the visitors it attracts) isn't what it was in the mid-'80s.

Way back under the Carter administration, when oil prices were soaring and money was flowing into the wallets of Texans and Oklahomans as fast as the derricks were pumping out crude, Taos caught a lot of the windfall. Especially, says Parks, because traditional Western art was *en vogue*.

Big banks and businesses wanted to fill their office walls with Southwestern work, and those with cash to burn spent much of it on art. Parks says even the moderately wealthy were tripping over themselves to buy all things cowboy and Indian.

In the midst of the boom, Taos galleries thrived. And so did many of the artists. One-man or one-woman shows were all the rage, and there was a real sense of artistic camaraderie, Parks says. Traditional painters mingled with and supported contemporary painters, and vice versa.

To add to the excitement, artists flocked to Taos for its bohemian atmosphere and inspiring venue. It's landscapes. It's cultures. All the other clichés.

The cheap cost of living didn't hurt either. Parks says a flock of young artists worked construction or tended bar two days a week to cover the rent and were able to paint and carouse the other five.

But in 1986 the price of oil plummeted. In some ways, it was the first sign that the party was over.

By the mid-'90s, Parks says the excitement of the Taos art scene began to wane.

Southwestern art was no longer the fad, and those who were once collecting pieces for their homes and offices were no longer coming in droves.

“For 15 years, maybe 20, the economic energy generated by art in this town has slowly but steadily declined. And it’s certainly at a low point now, as low as I’ve seen it in 37 years,” Parks says.

Hard hit

Galleries, which make up many of the storefronts in the historic district, have been especially hard hit in the last few years.

Since 2004, the state has broken down quarterly art gallery sales numbers by county. Recent art sales in Taos County peaked in 2006 at \$3.6 million. But that figure dropped more than 50 percent to \$1.7 million by 2009.

It’s not that art isn’t selling anymore, but it’s not going like it used to.

Meanwhile, there are three times as many licensed art galleries in town as there were a decade ago. The town of Taos issued 83 business licenses for galleries and studios in 1999. But in 2011, the number of licenses was up to 258.

Parks says the increase is probably because artists are going out on their own rather than relying on galleries to sell their work. It also could be that the term “gallery” is used a lot more liberally than it once was. But the numbers suggest something startling: As the pie in Taos gets smaller, there are more people competing for a slice.

Some in the art community say the ebbing tide of artistic vigor was worsened by a series of events: the 9/11 attacks in 2001; the death of the flamboyant R.C. Gorman in 2005; and probably the most devastating blow — the economic collapse of 2007 .

The current recession didn’t cause the problem, Parks says, but it certainly exacerbated it.

In the last year, Parks abandoned a spacious Bent Street location and set up shop in a much smaller space just north of the Plaza. He streamlined his operation by cutting back on the number of artists he represents and is hunkering down to ride out the storm.

Reasons

The reasons for the long decline are, of course, complex. But there are some salient explanations.

First, Parks suspects the public’s general appreciation for art — and thus their enthusiasm to buy fine art — has decreased. One-time collectors have aged, and a new generation shows less interest in dropping thousands of dollars on a painting.

“Art is not as important to people as it used to be, young people in particular,” Parks says. “Collectors are getting old. They’ve filled up their wall space.”

Other longtime galleries bemoan the decline of art appreciation. They almost resent having to explain to a tourist why they should buy a painting of an adobe church by a well-established artist for \$10,000 while another church painting by a lesser-known artist across the street is marked at \$300.

Another underlying issue facing Taos is that it may not be a viable center for art commerce in a rapidly changing market. It's small. It's isolated. And it's tough to compete with the better known, more diverse Santa Fe scene just down the road.

Or, even more threatening, it's tough to go head-to-head with the multitude of online galleries.

As for many of the Taos artists, the cost of living rose sharply at the same time that gallery sales were on the decline. It's harder to show work, and it's harder to get by on a shoestring.

Parks says the rising real estate prices helped to "sap the town of its artistic vitality." Just putting a roof over an artist's head has become a challenge, and aspiring or professional artists can't afford to paint and pay the rent.

According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the median price of a New Mexico home in 1970 was \$13,000. Even adjusted for inflation, that's less than \$50,000.

A recent housing survey found that the median price of single family homes sold between 2006 and 2009 in Taos County was around \$300,000. The study pointed out that only 5 percent of those employed in the county could afford to buy a home at that price.

Prestige

Still, Parks doesn't believe that Taos' prestige as a center for the arts is lost. In fact, he suggests that the museums — like the Millicent Rogers, the Taos Art Museum or the recently renovated Harwood — are carrying the torch.

"You won't find a museum like (the Harwood) in any town this size in the world," Parks says.

As such, he sees museums as Taos' art ambassadors.

Next year, Taos museums are collaborating on a theme titled "The Remarkable Women of Taos." It's just the kind of umbrella under which Parks thinks everyone — even the galleries and artists — can find some refuge from the economic storm. It's clean. It's classy. And it's a lot easier to market.

By coming together under these kinds of themes and encouraging galleries, museums and other businesses to get on the band wagon, Parks sees at least one way to gain the attention of those on the national art scene and convince them that Taos has still got it .



Steve Parks, a longtime gallery owner, says the economic energy generated by art has slowly but steadily declined in Taos.