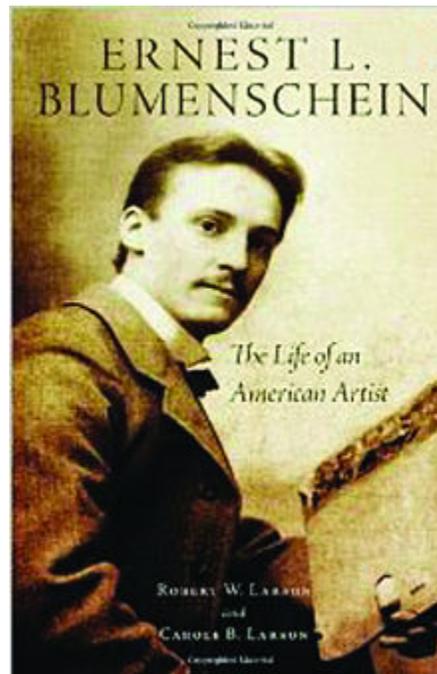


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"Ernest L. Blumenschein: The Life of An American Artist"

Nancy Coggeshall Aug 30, 2013



Ernest L. Blumenschein: The Life of An American Artist by Robert W. Larson and Carole B. Larson, University of Oklahoma Press, 344 pages

Early in 1898, Ernest Leonard Blumenschein and Bert Geer Phillips, both illustrators in New York, planned a painting trip to Mexico as a break from their work. Although they were ignorant about the outdoors, equine care, and western customs, they would cope. In Denver they purchased camping equipment, two horses, and a wagon. Their route followed the eastern flank of the Rocky Mountains. A coin toss and a late summer's rain-washed road in Northern New Mexico dictated a fateful change in their travel plans. Blumenschein rode the 20 miles to Taos, lugging the wheel that broke when their wagon slipped into a rut and "suddenly sat down." Approaching the town, the novice equestrian and Paris-educated artist was exhilarated at the sight of the Taos valley's "magnificent country," and he realized it signaled their destination. He later commented that it was "the first unforgettable inspiration of [his] life."

Blumenschein's trajectory from that moment arced toward more study in Paris, greater recognition as an illustrator, numerous awards and prizes, and an international reputation as an artist. In May 2011, his 1922 painting *White Robe and Blue Spruce* sold for \$1,583,500 at Sotheby's.

In *Ernest L. Blumenschein: The Life of an American Artist*, Robert W. Larson and Carole B. Larson examine Blumenschein's life and character, seeking to understand what motivated the hard work that led to his success. Their engaging, well-researched portrait of this 20th-century American artist acknowledges the social, economic, artistic, and historic influences in the context of his time.

Blumenschein, "Blummy" to his friends, was born on May 26, 1874, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, inheriting a New England Yankee's moral rectitude from his mother, Leonora Chapin, and ancestral Germanic self-discipline from his father, Wilhelm Leonard Blumenschein. Raised in Dayton, Ohio, where his musician father directed orchestras, choruses, and musical festivals, the young Blumenschein began studying the violin. He also began to draw and sketch — a legacy from his mother, who died when he was 4. That interest persisted through his high school years, when his cartoons and drawings appeared in a school newspaper, *Tom Foolery*, that he and his friends produced.

Hoping to dampen his son's artistic passion, Leonard suggested that he send a portfolio to the art editor at *Harper's Young People* magazine — perhaps a negative response would extinguish the boy's interest in art. The editor, however, urged Blumenschein to study further. Ernest attended the Cincinnati College of Music that fall but also took courses in art. During his second semester, he studied more formally at the Cincinnati Art Academy, which led to his acceptance at the Art Students League in New York in 1893.

Thereafter, art came first. Blumenschein devoted long hours to practicing the skills necessary for his craft. He subsequently became an illustrator for many of the country's leading magazines, and his paintings accompanied the work of Booth Tarkington, Jack London, Stephen Crane, and O. Henry.

During his three stints at the Académie Julian in *fin de siècle* Paris — he wanted “to learn from the traditionalists” — artists such as Vincent van Gogh, Mary Cassatt, and Edgar Degas were painting on the Left Bank. At the Académie Julian, Blumenschein met and befriended Phillips. Both were more interested in American Indians than French subjects, and their conversational topics included discussions about the relationship between a nation and its art.

Mary Greene was another American in Paris, enjoyed a sound reputation as an artist. During Blumenschein's third stay in Paris, the two met and fell in love. In proposing to her, however, he cautioned that art would hold the preeminent place in his life. Not frightened off, Greene agreed, and they were married on June 29, 1905. Two years later, their first child, a son, died two days following his birth. With Mary's second pregnancy, they returned to the United States. Their daughter, Helen, was born in 1909.

Until the family moved to Taos in 1919, Blumenschein divided his time between illustrating and portraiture in New York and figurative and landscape painting in Taos, leaving his wife and daughter in Brooklyn. In exploring Blumenschein's personality, the Larsons reveal his prickly nature and self-righteousness as well as his artistic development. They also chronicle his work as a patriotic German-American during the last century's two world wars, his sensitivity to and advocacy for Native Americans, and his promotion of Taos as an art colony. He was an athlete, an avid fisherman, and a shrewd businessman.

Blumenschein and Phillips were among the founders of the Taos Society of Artists in 1915 (incorporated in 1918). In the Museum of Modern Art's 1938 Paris exhibit *Three Centuries of Art in the United States*, Blumenschein was "the only member of the Taos Society of Artists" who had a painting in the show. He died in Albuquerque in 1960, preceded by his wife, Mary, in 1958.