

DOROTHY EUGENIE BRETT

(b. 1883 London, England d. 1977 Taos, New Mexico)

Media

Oil

Education

Slade School of Art, London, England

Public Collections (partial list)

Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Dallas, TX; Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO; El Paso Museum of Art, El Paso, TX; Fort Worth Art Center, Fort Worth, TX; Harwood Foundation, Taos, NM; Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, NM; National Portrait Gallery, London, England; Southwest Museum, Los Angeles, CA; Tate Gallery, London, England.

Selected Bibliography

Cassidy, Ina Sizer, "Art and Artist of New Mexico", *New Mexico Magazine*, March 1933.

Hignett, Sean, Brett From Bloomsbury to New Mexico, Franklyn Watts, New York, 1985.

Meyers, Roberta Courtney, "Brett of Taos", *Taos Profile*, January 1982.

When Frieda and D.H. Lawrence were invited to Taos in 1924 by Mabel Dodge, they brought with them their dear friend Lady Dorothy Brett. Brett was forty years old at the time and she adored D.H. Lawrence, however when the Lawrences decided to return to London after only a brief visit, Brett would not give up Taos to follow them. In fact, Brett remained in her beloved Taos until her death in 1977 at the age of ninety-three.

Born under the reign of Queen Victoria in London in 1883, Lady Dorothy Brett was the daughter of Viscount Esher, a close friend and advisor of the Queen. Brett and her sister took their dancing classes at Windsor Castle. Her first date was with Winston Churchill, and she was presented at Court before she was twenty. Brett never felt quite comfortable in her role as "Lady", so Dorothy became a Bohemian in the original sense of the word. She chopped off her hair, dressed as she pleased in men's trousers, and entered the Slade Art School. She studied under Augustus John, and took up with the renowned Bloomsbury Group. Her closest friends were George Bernard Shaw, Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley, Bertrand Russell and of course, D.H. and Frieda Lawrence.

In England her paintings included portraits of Katherine Mansfield, D.H. Lawrence and Lady Ottoline Morrell. But soon after settling in the Taos area she found that her former painting methods would not suffice, so she experimented with new techniques. Brett developed an unconventional style that combined the real and visionary world in a manner largely her own.

In her canvases devoted to Indian ceremonies, begun in 1927, Brett sought a fusion of the actual with the spiritual. She created a symbol in semi-realistic terms, inspired in part by the design quality of Indian arts and enlivened by her intimate study of the Indian dances. Brett wrote, "It is the inner life of the Indian that I have endeavored to paint, his reverence for the earth, the water, the world that feeds and keeps him alive." She was never one to participate in the trend of aggrandizing the Indian – painting the noble savage – preferring instead to focus on the private life of the subject. She said, "I had a different vision than most of the painters here. I called it 'the life beyond the life of the Indian'."

Her Indian and ceremonial pictures were painted entirely from memory since the making of photographs and on-the-spot sketches was prohibited. To grasp the reality and at the same time the mystery of the pageantry, she often portrayed multiple figures in a decorative manner which served to dematerialize her subjects as individuals, thus increasing the universal expressiveness of her pictures. The stylized linear quality of her work is realized by a fantasy of color. Often a pattern is fabricated which combines seemingly incompatible elements and skewed perspectives. These all exist in harmony because of the ordered abstract elements, which do not depend upon conventional relationships for their power of suggestion.

In New Mexico the "Lady" who had been served by maids and butlers most of her life, learned to chop wood, drive a car, fish expertly, take care of her own house and take care of herself. She lived in a modest adobe house in Taos with a spacious studio attached. On the door she painted, with wry humor, her family crest. She spent most of her time fishing, visiting the pueblo, and of course painting. Her work can seem at times almost childlike – lacking in perspective, riotous with color, a swirl in decorative line. But beneath this surface naiveté, Brett had an uncanny way of sensing the basic rhythms of her favorite subject, the Taos Indian celebrations. It was done almost instinctively. Her six years at the Slade gave her an approach to style, but her art was of herself. Her abundant work includes portraits, Indian dancers, landscapes and mystic or symbolic paintings. They are memorable images, very much connected to her own emotions and to those of the Indians whom she so greatly admired.