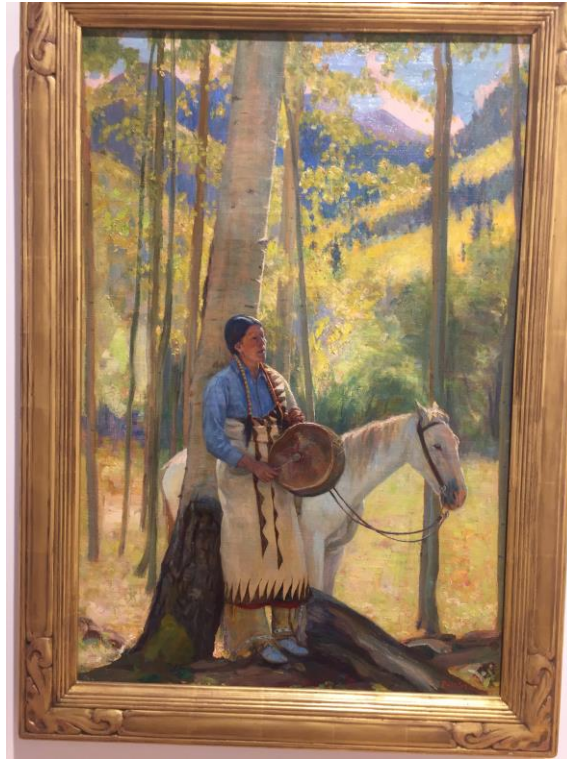


***“Untitled (Indian Drum Song), ca. 1950, by Bert Geer Phillips
Spotlight Paper by Ralph Petersen, 2017***



Artist’s Background Information

Bert Phillips was born in 1868 and raised in Hudson, New York, about 120 miles north of New York City along the Hudson River. He started creating art as a young boy, and he took studio art classes growing up. He left home for New York City at age 16 to study art at the Art Students League and the National Academy of Design for five years before traveling to England and Paris for two years to sketch, paint and study at the Academie Julian.

Phillips had a fascination with Native Americans that began in boyhood. He found a Mohican arrowhead in a limestone quarry near his home and retained it into his adulthood. He was taken by the tales of western heroes, particularly the Indian stories written by James Fenimore Cooper. Kit Carson also fascinated him. Likewise outdoor pursuits like game hunts drew him as a boy.

While in Paris, he befriended fellow art student Ernest Blumenschein, who shared his fascination with the American West and Native Americans in particular. After their return to New York in 1896, they set up a studio together, and began selling their

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art, including illustration work featuring Native American subjects, for which they hired Native Americans from Buffalo Bill’s show to serve as models.

In 1898, Blumenschein convinced Phillips to set out together on a trip to explore the Southwest and Mexico. They travelled by train to Denver, purchased a wagon, a couple of horses, a gun and supplies, and set out on their journey, neither of them having any experience pertinent to the task. After many mishaps along the way, including encountering armed bandits, they apparently met their breaking point twenty miles outside of Taos, when they hit a ditch and one of their wagon wheels broke. They flipped a coin and Blumenschein was assigned the task of walking the horse bearing the broken wheel to Taos for repair and back. They would finance the repair with the last of their funds, a three dollar gold piece Phillips had been saving. Taos was to be their first stop before journeying on to Mexico as fellow painter Joseph Sharp had extolled its merits to Phillips while they were in Paris. Blumenschein returned three days later with the repaired wagon wheel, excited about the Taos Pueblo and its beautiful environment. It would prove to be their journey’s end, and Phillips would end up spending the rest of his life living there.

In the year after arriving in Taos, Phillips married the visiting sister of the town doctor, began prospecting a mining interest in a nearby town, and opened The Curio Shop in Taos with a partner, selling Native American objects. He operated that business for five years and became extremely knowledgeable about Native American arts, maintaining a personal collection throughout his life. Meanwhile he sold artwork through exhibitions arranged by the Society of Western Artists, St. Louis Chapter. He worked as a forest ranger from 1907 to 1911 when his eyes were temporarily too strained to paint, returning to painting fulltime thereafter.

Shortly after taking up residence in Taos, Phillips began inviting other artists to come to Taos to live and work. He did so partly out of loneliness but also with the intention of creating an art colony, a community of artists. At the turn of the century, throughout Europe and the United States art colonies were being established (e.g., Provincetown, New Hope, Woodstock, Ogunquit) as places where artists could spend all or a part of the year living and working in idyllic settings outside of the cities where they normally plied their trade. Phillips was successful in this effort, with increasing

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numbers of artists coming for all or part of the year to work and live in Taos. In 1915, six of those artists, including Phillips, Blumenschein and Sharp, established the Taos Society of Artists. The primary purpose of the Society was to sell the artists’ work through travelling exhibitions, as there were no art galleries in Taos at that time. The success of that effort was immediate, as it drew critical attention to the artists and greater recognition to Taos and its attributes. The Society grew in number of members and public recognition until it was disbanded in 1927, apparently due to lagging sales on the exhibition circuit but also due to discord among its members regarding leadership.

Relationship to Other Works in the Museum’s Collection

Phillips had seven years of academic training in addition to the art education he received as a boy in Hudson, and all of that training was of a classical nature. He remained relatively unaffected by and emphatically eschewed the contemporary movements away from direct depictions of the human form, in natural environments, and was instead invested in an idealism rooted in the perfection of the human form and the universality of human values that are the hallmarks of classical painting. His realistic style never altered, yet Phillips is frequently referred to as a “romantic” painter, and in fact Phillips used the term to describe himself. Perhaps the term in part describes how his subjects often seemed to embody qualities that inspired some degree of positive emotional response on the part of the viewer, in addition to the scenic beauty of the Taos scenery. This is not the dramatic emotional content of the Romantics of the late 18th and early 19th centuries like Delacroix, Gericault or Turner. Phillips’ Native American subjects like here are solemn, contemplative, seemingly connected to a greater spiritual universe and their rendering engenders empathy and compassion on the part of the viewer. Contrast such images with those of Native Americans in the works by Russell, Remington and others in the museum, in which the Native American subjects are characteristically not seen in a reflective pose.

During the late 19th century artists in the United States and in Europe were taking an interest in peoples whose lifestyles diverted from modern civilization or were guided by intense spiritual beliefs. Phillips had been attracted to the Shakers in eastern New York State and to the Brittany peasants whom he painted in France. The interest appeared to represent a certain disdain for modern life. Phillips came to see the Taos

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Pueblo Indians as having an antidote to the evils of American life. White, urban America had lost touch with nature. Phillips always portrayed the Taos Indian as untouched by white civilization and characteristically artistic and creative.

Technique and Methods

The subject painting labeled *Untitled (Indian Drum Song)* was completed around 1950, six years before Phillips death in 1956. *Untitled (Indian Drum Song)* is oil on canvas, a 75th Anniversary gift of Annette C. Smith in memory of Bill Smith.

It depicts a model, thought to be John Reyna of the Taos Pueblo, leaning against a tree and beating a drum, accompanied by a small horse amidst bright colored leaves, probably aspen trees.

Analysis and Interpretation

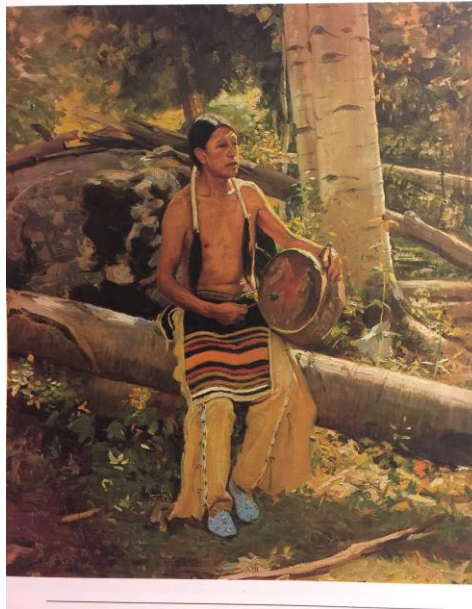
The serene, slightly raised gaze of the model as he beats the drum may imply that he is listening to his drumbeats as they join the symphony of natural sounds in the forest, or that he is listening for some response. His clothing is for the most part tribal, and domestic, but includes a blue button down shirt, indicating that this Pueblo member sits astride two cultures at least to that extent.

Rhythm and sound were important aspects of Taos Pueblo ceremonial life. Phillips frequently characterized Taos Indians as gifted musicians who drew their creativity from nature itself. He attributed the rhythm of nature to their skills in other arts (e.g., blankets, pottery, and baskets) as well.

This painting represents one of a handful of paintings in which Phillips investigates light. Light reaches and affects nearly all elements of the painting. Walter Ufer may have influenced him in this regard. Ufer was a Chicago artist who first came to Taos in 1914 and in 1917 joined the Taos Society of Artists. Ufer produced sun-drenched paintings.

Phillips also painted another sun-drenched painting (*Song of the Yellow Flower*) that bears an uncanny resemblance to the painting that is the subject of this paper. It may even be the same model, in almost the same pose, wearing the same blue moccasins, beating a similar drum, in a similar and similarly lit setting.

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Bert Phillips
Song of the Yellow Flower

In *Indian Drum Song*, Phillip’s painting may be a copy of this other, more fully realized Phillips painting, painted not from life but in the studio as an amalgam of various images, some of which do not quite work in the final painting. Alternatively, *Indian Drum Song* may have been a study for *Song of the Yellow Flower*. (I was unable to confirm the date that *Song of the Yellow Flower* was painted despite significant research). Phillips also painted the horse in a separate, similarly posed painting. Neither the Native American subject nor the horse appears to be rendered in an anatomically correct manner in *Indian Drum Song*. Also, the fallen log at the right simply disappears behind the Indian’s leg, and there are no indicia of depth for it or the horse behind it at that point.

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