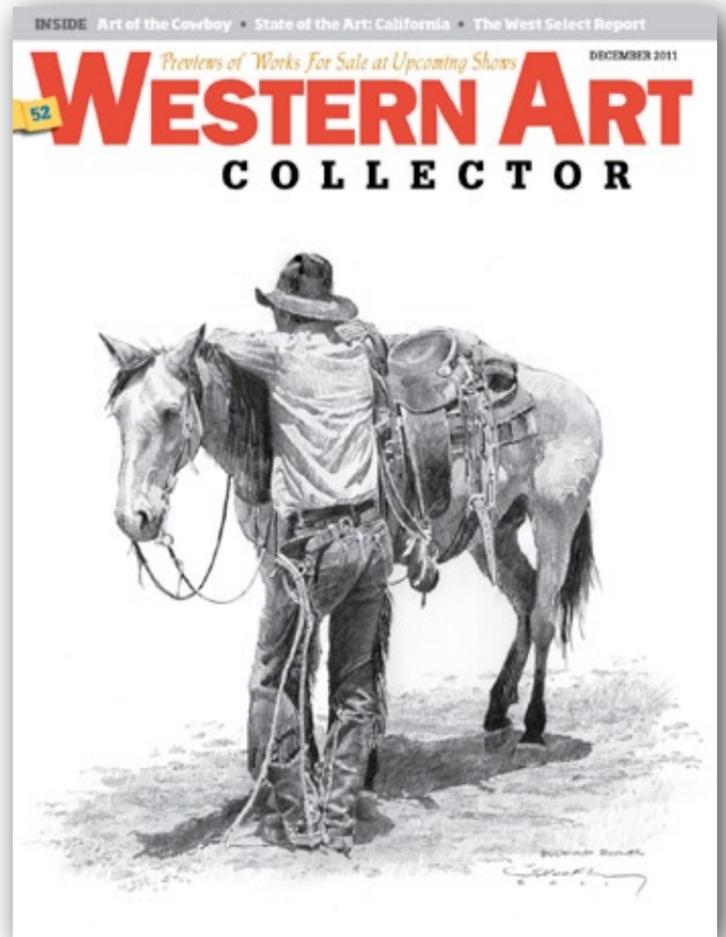


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# *The* Inn at the End of the Trail

The colorful social and artistic history of Santa Fe meets the present  
and the future at La Fonda Hotel.

By John O'Hern





Santa Fe's La Fonda Hotel is the oldest hotel in the country's oldest capitol city on a site rumored to have had held a *fonda*, or inn, since 1610. The earliest documented inn on the site welcomed guests in the 1820s. The current hotel opened in 1922 where the Santa Fe Trail and the Camino Real meet, overlooking the famed Santa Fe Plaza. Romance and history abound.

Stepping into the lobby of the historic hotel is like stepping back in time. Sitting in the lobby you can imagine the thousands of guests and visitors who have wandered its halls, slept in its rooms, and dined in its restaurant. Waking from the reverie you know you are in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century luxury hotel and become aware that you are also surrounded by high-quality historic and contemporary original art not—for want of a better phrase—"hotel art."

It's the art, of course, that brought me to this historic spot. The art complements the architecture and interior design in a comfortable collaboration. Designed by Isaac Rapp, the building incorporates elements of Spanish Colonial, Pueblo, and, occasionally, Moorish designs. The interiors were renovated and expanded in the late 1920s by Mary Jane Colter when the hotel was run by the legendary Fred Harvey Company. It was Colter's interiors that prompted the French philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir to write, "...La Fonda is the most beautiful hotel in America, perhaps the most beautiful I have ever seen in my life. The patio is surrounded by cool walkways paved with a mosaic of tiles and Spanish-style furnishings..."

Today the task of maintaining and adding to the physical beauty de Beauvoir admired, and assuring that the hotel maintains the highest standards, lies with Jenny Kimball, chair of the La Fonda board, and her staff. Beginning a tour in the lobby, Jenny pointed out paintings by Gerald Cassidy (1879-1934) recently restored and returned to the walls and, as we rounded a corner, a large landscape by Tony Abeyta (Navajo) recently commissioned by the hotel. Up on The Terrace level, overlooking the Plaza and the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi, we saw rooms containing works by Dorothy Dunn and students of the Santa Fe Indian School as well as paintings by contemporary artist Shonto Begay (Navajo).

The cathedral figures are prominent in Willa Cather's novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, which she wrote while staying at La Fonda.

Sam and Ethel Ballen bought La Fonda in 1968 when it was run down and rooms were renting for \$8 a night. Because of their successful efforts to bring La

◀ La Fonda c. 1920s

Fonda back to its days of glory, and for their community spirit, Sam and Ethel were named Santa Fe Living Treasures in 2000. Today the board and staff of La Fonda carry on in their memory. The Ballens' love of Native American art will continue to be reflected in new acquisitions to the collection.

Although a hotel, first and foremost, La Fonda's art collection is increasingly being cared for at museum standards to match its museum quality. Jenny told me the 10 large Cassidy paintings were commissioned by the Santa Fe Railway in 1922 to promote tourism. Today, cleaned and stabilized by John Andolsek of Andolsek Restoration in Santa Fe, they are displayed throughout the hotel where they can continue to be admired.

Art in public places adds to the aesthetic ambience of a space but suffers from exposure. The days of smoking and the inevitable accumulation of grime dimmed the vibrant colors of the Cassidy's. Today they look the way Cassidy intended. (Jenny also pointed out a mural by another artist that had been cleaned of decades of "fajita grease" and relocated.)



Gerald Cassidy's painting *The Eagle Dancer* is part of the La Fonda Collection.





La Fonda's Santa Fe Room boasts three paintings by Gerald Cassidy.  
PHOTO BY BILL STENGEL



Gerald Cassidy's painting *El Tovar* in a hallway of The Terrace at La Fonda.  
PHOTO BY BILL STENGEL



La Fonda Board Chairwoman Jenny Kimball talks with artist Tony Abeyta about his painting *Stormy Canyon* (above), which was commissioned by the hotel.  
PHOTO BY KERRY SHERCK



The lucky guests in this suite have their very own painting by Shonto Begay.  
PHOTO BY BILL STENGEL

Cassidy's *The Eagle Dancer* currently hangs in the Santa Fe Room where it can be admired by guests attending meetings and weddings. Cassidy honored many traditions of the Southwest in this series and here celebrates the eagle dance, which is performed at many nearby pueblos to honor the eagle as a symbol of the breath of life. In a hall of The Terrace level, *El Tovar* commemorates Coronado's search for the mythical Seven Cities of Gold, and his attendant Franciscan monk.

Less fragile but equally important pieces in the hotel's collection are many large terracotta bas-reliefs by the German-born American modernist Arnold Rönnebeck (1885-1947). During her period of work at La Fonda Mary Jane Colter commissioned wood and wrought

iron embellishments—some traditional and some surprisingly whimsical. The practice was continued by subsequent architects and designers working on expansions and renovations.

Also befitting the museum quality of La Fonda's collection, the hotel is making labels for the major pieces displayed throughout the building to enlighten their discerning guests.

La Fonda's care of its collections and its decision to continue to display them in public spaces is exemplary in a city that is the third largest art market in the country despite its small size. The colorful social and artistic history of Santa Fe meets the present and the future in "the inn at the end of the trail." 🌿



*Santa Fe Editor John O'Hern, who has retired after 30 years in the museum business, specifically as the Executive Director and Curator of the Arnot Art Museum, Elmira, N.Y., is the originator of the internationally acclaimed Re-presenting Representation exhibitions, which promote realism in its many guises. John was chair of the Artists Panel of the New York State Council on the Arts. He writes for gallery publications around the world, including regular monthly features on Art Market Insights in American Art Collector magazine. Having succumbed to the lure of the West, he now lives in what he refers to as a "converted adobe goat shed," in the high desert of New Mexico, where he is acquainting himself with new flora and fauna.*