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point of view

Lois Rudnick on Cady Wells

November 1, 2009

"Under the Skin" of New Mexico: The Life, Times, and Art of Cady Wellsby [Lois Rudnick](#)

I first encountered artist Cady Wells (1904-1954) some thirty years ago, when I was researching the life and times of arts patroness Mabel Dodge Luhan (1879-1962). Luhan had settled in Taos, New Mexico in 1918, along with many other expatriates from the East coast, who were looking for a "sense of place" outside of urban America that would provide them with fresh visions and alternative ways of thinking and producing American culture. In 1923 she married a Taos Indian, Antonio Lujan, her fourth and final husband.



Cady Wells. Photograph by Philippe Halsman.
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Hoping to transform Anglo American culture from its militaristic, individualistic, and materialistic values, she sought to create a utopian community that would attract the nation's (and the world's) greatest writers, artists, and social reformers. Over the course of the 40 years she lived there, she hosted Marsden Hartley, Georgia O'Keeffe, D. H. Lawrence, Ansel Adams, and many other movers and shakers.



Mabel Dodge Luhan in 1934.
Photograph by Carl Van Vechten.

One of the artists in her circle who had always intrigued me, but about whom very little had been written, was Cady Wells. Wells's emotional power, aesthetic originality, and technical prowess seemed to me to place him in the forefront of the modern artists who painted in New Mexico in the post-war eras of the two World Wars.

My interest in Wells rekindled three years ago when I was asked by the University of New Mexico Press to review Earl Ganz's historical novel *The Taos Truth Game*, which was published in 2006. The novel focuses on the love affair between Wells and Myron Brinig, a Jewish-American writer from Montana, who published 21 novels about the West in the mid-twentieth century.



Myron Brinig as photographed by Cady Wells in 1935.

Brinig and Wells met in the summer of 1933, most likely at the home of Mabel Dodge Luhan, and they spent the summer of 1934 together in one of her guesthouses. (Luhan was also in love with Brinig and wrote a thankfully unpublished novel in which she tried to save him from Wells and from homosexuality—but that is another story.)

Ganz's novel foregrounds, for the first time to my knowledge, the significance of the gay writer-artist communities in the development of the Anglo arts colonies of Santa Fe and Taos.

A similar community emerged in the Seattle area in the 1930s with the group known as the Northwest School—three of whose core members were the gay painters Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, and Guy Anderson.

Like Wells, who greatly admired Graves's art, they were deeply influenced by Japanese and Chinese philosophies and aesthetics. This influence is hardly surprising given the impact of Asian painting on European and American modern art. Yet it is, I believe, quite differently inflected in their work because of their queer identities, as I discuss in my new book, *Cady Wells and Southwestern Modernism*

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The book, which also includes contributions by Robin Farwell Garvin and Sharon R. Udall, is a study of Wells's life, times, and art, within a broad historical context that includes the development of a particularly Southwestern style in modern art; the emergence of the queer communities of Santa Fe and Taos; and Wells's intimate friendship with dancer Martha Graham.

Within his first decade of painting in Santa Fe and Taos, Wells developed a series of styles unlike those of the other Santa Fe and Taos moderns, whose paintings helped to define New Mexico as "the land of enchantment" (officially designated as such by Gov. Bill Richardson in 2003).

Asian art traditions and techniques seem to have served Wells in the same way that critic Matthew Kangas has suggested they served the gay artists of the Northwest School: providing him with a language for "building a gay erotics of painting," a visual encoding system that veiled "the pain of being a homosexual in an alien, unsympathetic culture." (See Matthew Kangas. "Prometheus Ascending: Homoerotic Imagery of the Northwest School." *Homosexuality and Homosexuals in the Arts*. Wayne Dynes, ed. New York: Garland Press, 1992. 84-101.)

Given Wells's youthful struggles with his identity as a gay male, and the carefulness with which he guarded his sexual life (at least in his writings, including his diaries), it is not surprising that his early paintings are rife with calligraphic markings that can be read as suggestive coding for his sexuality.

In the post-war period, when Abstract Expressionism was becoming the signature style of modern American painters, the work of Tobey, Graves, and Wells continued to maintain a connection to the physical world, a commitment that may well have been related to their desire to embody themselves in their work. It is not surprising that the much ballyhooed machismo of large canvas action painters like Jackson Pollock resulted in art critics marginalizing painters who worked on smaller—read more "feminine"—scales, and in seemingly more traditional styles.

Wells's dark, passionate, and brooding semi-abstract landscapes are much more akin to the work of his fellow gay painters of the Northwest School, and, like them, he responded to the devastating horrors of World War II in his art.

In Wells's case, the horrors were close to home: he spent nine months witnessing the last battles of the war in Europe, and then returned home to find that Los Alamos, twelve miles from his home, was the site where the first atomic bomb had been developed.

On-going explosions shook his home on a weekly basis. Rather than being an escape from the world, as Santa Fe was for so many expatriates after both World War I and World War II, it became for Cady ground zero, the likely place where World War III would begin.

No post-war New Mexican artist responded to the war and the U. S. government's continuing nuclear weapons project with the passion and power that Cady Wells did. Arts impresario Merle Armitage wrote to Wells's father, after Cady's tragic death ten days before his 50th birthday, that Wells was the only artist who had gotten "under the skin of the Southwest."

My research on Wells introduced me to the lesser-known works of a wonderful artist who had received important attention on the regional and national levels during his own lifetime, and who was in need of rediscovery and recuperation. It also made me aware of the lack of historical research on the queer communities of Santa Fe and Taos in the first half of the twentieth century, even though gay and lesbian writers and artists were important contributors to the civic, political, commercial, and cultural life of these communities.

Poets Witter Bynner and Spud Johnson, performance artist Jacques Cartier, and painter Agnes Sims, for example, were not only cultural producers; they were also deeply involved in social and political activities related to the preservation of Hispanic and Native American cultures.

As I worked on my book, I decided that I had to find out what brought Wells from the stolid Victorian New England town of Southbridge, Massachusetts, which his family, the owners of the American Optical Company, more or less ruled, to the queer-tolerant Anglo arts communities of New Mexico. In the process I gained some insight into what life was like for a gay man in these communities. (His younger gay brother, Mason Wells, also joined him there, although his main residences were in California).

While there has been significant work on gay urban history and on gay figurative artists in the U. S., we seem to be just beginning to examine queer culture and history in the remoter regions of the nation, and in the works of non-figurative artists.

When I started my research, I had assumed that Santa Fe and Taos

(Wells worked in both places) were safe and welcoming places for gay men and lesbians. In many respects, this was true—there were, for example, no arbitrary or self-imposed boundaries about where gay men and lesbians had to live, play, or work (as long as they were discreet in public).

But I also discovered that the closet was present here as elsewhere during the period from the 1930s through the 1950s, decades that historian George Chauncey has shown became increasingly homophobic. In one manifestation of how this climate affected Wells, he wrote to a semi-closeted bisexual friend from Santa Fe about how distraught he was over the firing of homosexuals from the government during the McCarthy-era hysteria, which scapegoated homosexuals as perverts and potential security risks.

One of the most poignant interviews I did for my book was with the one living gay artist from Wells's era that I was able to locate in Santa Fe, Ford Ruthling.

Ruthling talked about how difficult it was for him to be a gay teenager in Santa Fe and remembered being invited to a party at Wells's house to meet some visiting New York friends. He refused to go, and when I asked him why, he said that if Cady's name had been "John," he might have, suggesting that he feared being tainted by association with a man whose name sounded feminine. (Wells's given name was Henry Cady Wells; he went by Cady, except, interestingly, when he served in the army from 1942 to 1944, when he used the moniker "Hank.")

Ruthling finally met Wells in 1953 and found him to be a wonderful man, whose letters to him while he served in the U. S. Air Force helped him to make it through a difficult experience.

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To learn more about Lois Rudnick's new book *Cady Wells and Southwestern Modernism* please visit the [Museum of New Mexico Press website](#).

About Lois Rudnick

Lois Rudnick has recently retired from the University of Massachusetts Boston, where she was chair of the American Studies Department. She is the author of several books on New Mexico's Anglo writer and artist communities, including *Utopian Vistas: The Mabel Dodge Luhan House and the American Counterculture* (1996), and editor of *Cady Wells and Southwestern Modernism* (2009).



Lois Rudnick.

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