

Rogers Museum spotlights namesake as visionary

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Courtesy Millicent Rogers Museum

Millicent Rogers, photograph circa 1947

In 1947, Millicent Rogers arrived in Taos with a vast inherited fortune, fashionista celebrity and a broken heart. She walked along dirt roads in garish designer outfits of her own creation, became friends with writers and artists and saw the native people of the Southwest for the first time.

And they no doubt saw her, a model-slim and sharp-featured woman, smoking long cigarettes

between perpetually red lips — for many, she must have been the picture of an outsider. But, in spite of all her extravagance, Rogers found a place among the Southwest's most isolated communities as she became an advocate for the protection of Native American rights and cultural property.

Her legacy continues today at the Millicent Rogers Museum, located at 1504 Millicent Rogers Road in El Prado. The museum houses a collection of more than 7,000 pieces of Southwestern textiles, jewelry, pottery and art — many of which were collected by Rogers herself. This November marks the museum's 60th anniversary.

The lead-up begins with two exhibits opening Friday (Feb. 19).

“The first exhibit is part of the Taos Arts and Culture Consortium theme for this year, which is ‘Taos Visionaries,’” said Caroline Jean Fernald, the new executive director at the museum. “Our contribution to that is ‘Millicent as Visionary.’ We’ll be looking at the life and history of Millicent Rogers: things that she was interested in, events that happened in her life, her collecting of Native American and Hispanic arts and her advocacy for those communities ... and how that parallels with the mission of the museum.”



Millicent Rogers' granddaughter Christina Peralta-Ramos
Courtesy photo

Rogers' granddaughter Christina Peralta-Ramos, who has experience as a fashion model and actress, will appear in-person at the museum Saturday (Feb. 20), 1 p.m., to deliver a talk about her memories of the museum's namesake.

The museum was established in 1956 by Rogers' sons, the late Paul Peralta-Ramos (Christina's father) and the late Arturo Peralta-Ramos, with the vision of "sharing and celebrating the arts and cultures of the Southwest." Though Rogers herself had never expressed an intention to establish a museum, her love of Southwestern culture and dedication to its preservation are carried on by the museum's mission.

Rogers was born on Feb. 1, 1902, in the New York area and was raised in high-society Manhattan, Tuxedo Park and Southampton. As an heiress of the Standard Oil fortune, her family owned many homes both in the United States and abroad. Although she traveled to many of them, it was not until she moved to Taos that she found the home where she would spend the rest of her life.

Like many before and since her time, the combination of great wealth and natural beauty propelled Rogers into a role as a model and later as a successful fashion designer. "She was kind of like the Paris Hilton of her time," said Fernald.

By the mid-1920s, Rogers' image was known around the country as she regularly appeared in magazines like Harper's Bazaar and Vogue. Today, many of her clothing designs can be viewed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She famously dated movie stars, including the "king of Hollywood," Clark Gable, who abruptly ended their relationship and prompted Rogers' move to Taos.

Upon arrival, she was immediately captured by the beauty and authenticity of Southwestern art and was one of the first to advocate its preservation. In 1951, she organized a group of locals that included Frank Waters, Oliver Lafarge and Lucius Beebe. Together, they hired lawyers and visited Washington, D.C., where they successfully lobbied for Native American art to be classified as historic, thus ensuring its protection.

Kathleen Michaels has served as the museum's curator for 11 years. She said her mother would tell her stories about Rogers' first visits to Taos Pueblo. "When my mom was a little girl, her friends would say, 'Let's go pretend we're Millicent.' Then they would go and get some chokecherries and paint their lips red, pretend that they had a long cigarette and try to walk all fancy."

“I don’t think enough could be said or shown about [Rogers] as a visionary. She was a woman of the world. She lived large and followed her heart and came here with heartbreak — but even after all that, she finally became grounded when she came to Taos. Her love for the culture is a passion that she discovered and developed. Had she not started this collection, I don’t think we would have this gem here in Taos.”

The second exhibit opening this Friday is titled “The Supernaturals: Contemporary Katsinas from the Collection.” Although it is distinct from “Millicent as Visionary,” it serves to highlight the museum’s curatorial methodology and commitment to cultural respect.

“It’s pretty exciting because we don’t usually exhibit katsinas,” said Carmela Quinto, curator of collections. “Of all of the objects in the collection, they’re probably at the top as far as cultural property and being the most sensitive items in the collection. We have some of the older pieces that are really wonderful, but I don’t exhibit them because we don’t actually have a right to.”

Within the Puebloan religion, katsinas are ‘spirit beings’ represented in three forms: the supernatural entity, the tribal katsina dancers and the katsina dolls. Due to the



A katsina sculpture by contemporary artist Stetson Honyumtewa, from the MRM collection

Courtesy Millicent Rogers Museum

museum's respect for privacy, the latter will be displayed only in the form of "contemporary katsinas made by master carvers."

"This exhibit reflects how much we've grown over the last 60 years," Quinto continued.

"People have donated katsinas to our collection, pottery, all of these other things, so that we now have about two dozen different collections in the museum that represent the Southwest. And it's not just like Taos Pueblo over here and the Hispanic community over there. You can see it in the language, you can see it in the food, in the religion, in the dress and in the music — we've all influenced each other over the last couple hundred years."

Hours for Millicent Rogers Museum are 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday from November through March and every day from April through October. Admission is free for Taos County residents.

For more information, visit millicentrogers.org or call (575) 758-2462.

