

## The Southwestern Aesthetic

*Gerald and Kathleen Peters in Santa Fe's de la Peña House*

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT RECK

AT A SOTHEBY'S auction in the winter of 1987, Santa Fe gallery owner Gerald Peters surprised many in the art world when he bought nine of the ten major paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe from the estate of her sister, Anita O'Keeffe Young. After the sale, excited reporters asked Peters what he planned to do with the remarkable group of pictures, including *Jimson Weed* and *Petunia No. 2*, by one of America's great modern artists. He said that he planned to keep them. Indeed, he kept six, and along with other classic examples of modern art, O'Keeffe's flowers, leaves and trees

now hang in his Santa Fe living room.

Unlike many gallery owners, Peters considers himself a collector. His wife, Kathleen, runs Sena, one of the two galleries they own, which represents contemporary artists of the West and Southwest. She also collects. Their mutual passion is art with the distinctive flavor of New Mexico, whether it be paintings by the state's best-known artist or a water jar by an unknown Pueblo Indian.

For over twenty years they have collected works that span the cultural history of New Mexico. Originally from Denver, Peters had been introduced

to art by a grandfather who collected the paintings of Nicolai Fechin and Leon Gaspard, twentieth-century Russian artists who immigrated to the Southwest. After graduating from St. John's College in Santa Fe in 1970, he began trading in early American furniture and native American rugs. Although he initially represented traditional western art and indigenous crafts, during the last decade he expanded the Gerald Peters Gallery to accommodate O'Keeffe's art and that of other American artists who visited Santa Fe and Taos in the twenties: Marsden Hartley, Stu-

"What keeps me in New Mexico is the space, a different sense of space than in a big-city environment," says gallery owner Gerald Peters, who lives with his wife, Kathleen, also an art dealer, in a Santa Fe adobe that was built in the early 1800s. ABOVE: The de la Peña House, named after a sergeant in the Mexican army who purchased it in 1845, was initially a four-room structure. Added to throughout the years, the house assumed its present U-shaped configuration in the 1920s under the ownership of writer and artist Frank Applegate. OPPOSITE: The enclosed courtyard provides access to various parts of the house and serves as an outdoor room in summer.

art Davis, John Marin, Paul Strand, Rebecca Strand James and New Mexican moderns such as Raymond Jonson and Andrew Dasburg.

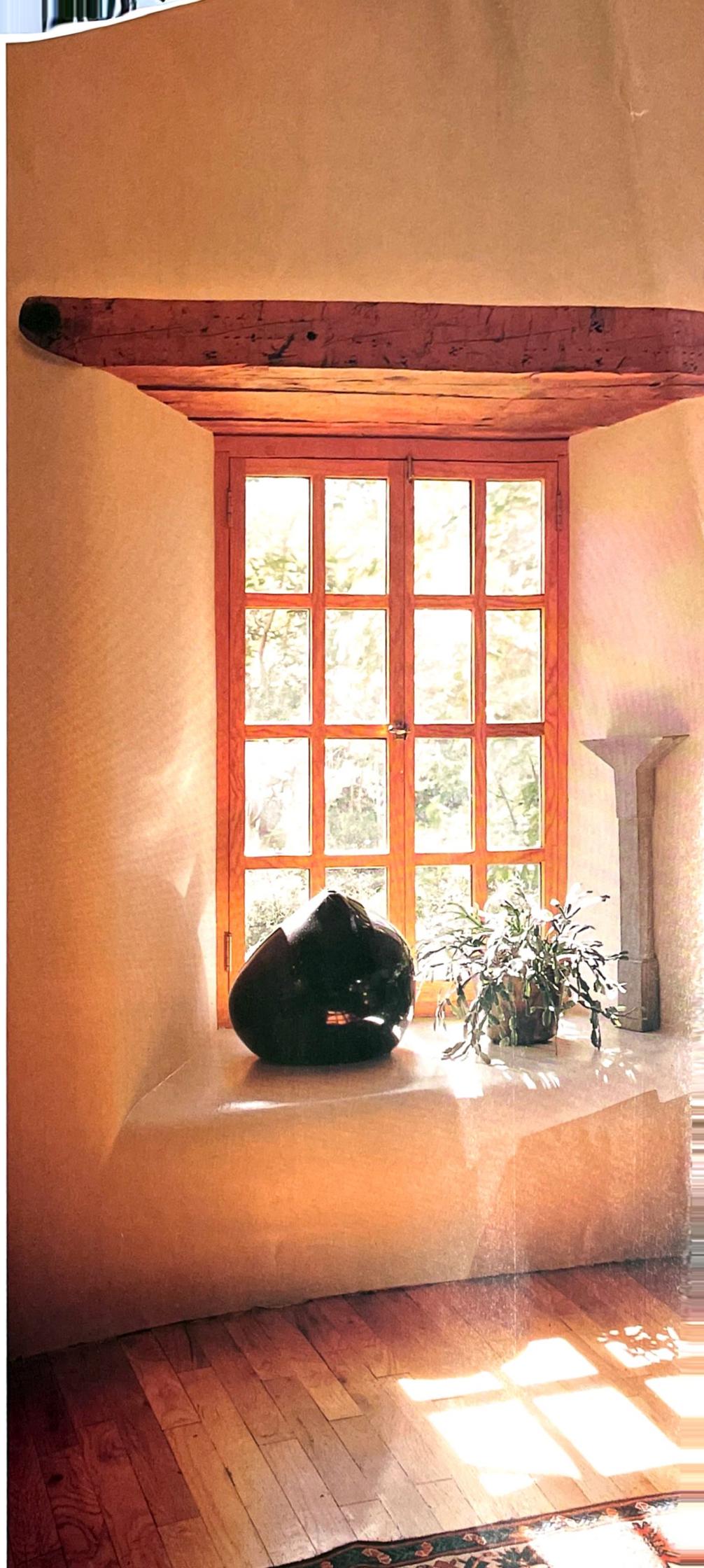
For his personal collection, Peters often selects works that possess the mystery associated with the landscape and rituals of New Mexico. "If the paintings weren't able to do that, I wouldn't have them around," Peters says flatly. "For instance, our O'Keeffe painting of the black cross captures the symbolism of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

"A lot of the art in our collection makes a more modern language out of the present reality of New Mexico," he continues. "You get insights from that. It started with the New Mexican art of the twenties. I think it helps if an artist lived here, but Hartley captured some things in two summers. Davis did it in one summer. O'Keeffe did it from her first trip. They all made fantastic paintings."

The couple found an excellent backdrop for their collections in the de la Peña house, one of the older properties in Santa Fe. It is a house with a lively history. Originally four rooms with a portal, it was bought for \$114 in 1845 by Francisco de la Peña. A sergeant in the Mexican army, he fought the Navajo and Texans. After he was mustered out, he settled with his wife, Isabelita, and eight children. Two of de la Peña's daughters lived in the house until the mid-twenties, when they sold it to artist and writer Frank Applegate.

A founding member of the Society of New Mexico Painters, with an interest in native American arts, Applegate made many changes to the de la Peña house. He constructed a second story using the beams and portal from the ground floor. Recognizing that the portal at the front entrance was unusual because its corbels were

Throughout the Peters residence, the compelling spirit of the Southwest resounds in works by artists such as Georgia O'Keeffe. In a corner of the living room, O'Keeffe's *Jimson Weed*, 1932, left, and *Autumn Trees, the Maple*, 1924, hang near a lacquered bronze by her longtime friend and assistant Juan Hamilton.





In the 1920s, Frank Applegate enclosed and plastered an elevated “shepherd’s bed” that stood outside the house and made it part of the main residence. The small sleeping area, which is now in the master bedroom, is decorated with Pueblo pottery, Navajo rugs and paintings by Walter Ufer and Joseph H. Sharp, *Down a Hillside in Taos*, circa 1920, and *Governors on Portal*, 1894.

part of the same log, he had a copy made for the downstairs and moved the original portal upstairs along with the first-floor beams. Applegate also rescued Spanish colonial balconies from a building that was to be demolished and attached them to his growing structure.

The Peterses wanted to preserve the history of the house. In more than twenty years of marriage they had renovated five other adobes together. Often Gerald Peters did his own construction—slipping the mud on the adobe walls—and even on

this one he acted as the contractor.

There had been several owners since Applegate. The Peterses decided to take the house back to its shell and restore it completely. They removed a twentieth-century staircase that had been erected in the eighteenth-century dining room. The fireplaces were torn out to receive new tile flues and then were rebuilt as they had been before. Pine floors, traditional when the house was built, were put in, and radiant heating was added beneath the boards. New window frames and doors were designed by John and

Leslie Pierpont, a pair of “Harvard-trained designers,” and Gerald Peters.

Finding that the house needed a few amenities but not wanting to interfere with the original design, the Peterses added to the outside of the building—an extension on one bedroom, a bath, a two-floor exercise wing, two stairwells, a room for hunting and fishing gear, a wine cellar and a closet. Four additional fireplaces were installed. The restoration took two years to complete.

The house is furnished with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Amer-



A room that dates back to the original early-19th-century adobe structure was improved in 1981 with pine floors and radiant heating and is now used for dining. Georgia O'Keeffe's still life *Apple Family A*, circa 1921, hangs between her *Black Cross with Red Sky*, 1929, and a Crucifixion scene by the 18th-century artist Molleno. On the piano in the living room is Elie Nadelman's *Dancer*, circa 1918.

ican and Spanish colonial furniture, native American rugs and pottery, and paintings by artists from the Santa Fe and Taos schools, the moderns and O'Keeffe.

The main entrance, a crumbling, caramel-colored adobe arch and a heavy pine door, disguises the rusticated civility within. The *placita*, a front courtyard, is an arrangement of manicured lawn, potted plants and handsome abstract bronzes by Juan Hamilton, O'Keeffe's assistant and friend. Antique doors lead from the courtyard to various rooms within

the house. The covered patio bears a lintel from an old northern New Mexico church, and ceilings are supported by aged *latillas* and *vigas*.

Apart from contemporary sculpture by Hamilton and Beverly Pepper, the art in the house is primarily nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the living room are five remarkable O'Keeffes. Smaller sculptures by Hamilton rest nearby on the window ledges. Works by O'Keeffe's fellow moderns, artists who showed with the galleries owned by Alfred Stieglitz, appear throughout. There is

a painting, *Camellias in a Vase*, by Hartley and a bronze sculpture, *Sleeping Gull*, by Gaston Lachaise. Complementing the simplicity of these works are the curves of an eighteenth-century American butterfly table and a Bechstein grand piano.

In contrast to the formality of the living room, the dining room is devoted to the comforts of the Southwest. At one end is a nineteenth-century *trastero*, a massive cabinet that last belonged to a friend of O'Keeffe's, Mary Wheelwright. On top are Holy Family

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Gerald and Kathleen Peters in Santa Fe  
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ly figures from northern New Mexico. Throughout the house, Peters freely mixes early American furnishings with southwestern antiques. It is all "art of the place," he insists. "It has a specific character that comes from its culture."

An early American table and chairs are arranged in front of the adobe fireplace in the breakfast room. Small paintings by O'Keeffe, Arthur Dove and Joseph Stella brighten the wall above the early American side table. Not everyone would hang such paintings in an area of the kitchen used mostly by the family. "The art isn't sacred. It's part of our normal living environment. Our outlook comes from being used to having a lot of art around. It becomes part of the family," explains Peters. "I've always been interested in southwestern history. It has a lot to do with a respect for pioneer independence and for free-thinkers. Western history represents an exploration of the American psyche. You can see that in the western art made between 1800 and 1900."

In the newly constructed sitting room, Peters's enduring affection for western art is revealed in a selection

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of small paintings by artists of the Taos Society of Artists such as Ernest L. Blumenschein and Bert Phillips, as well as Fechin and Gaspard. A staircase leads up to the library, where hundreds of volumes on fine art share space with drawings and paintings.

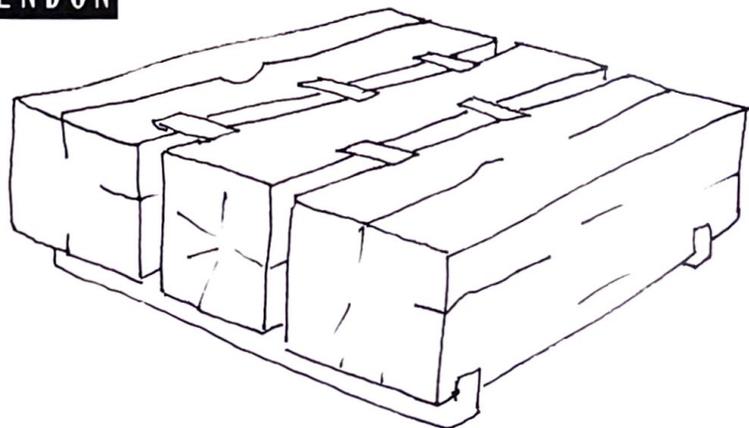
Native American artifacts accent various rooms of the house, but the library holds the largest collection, the historic Pueblo pottery, much of it from San Ildefonso.

"I'm no decorator," says Gerald Peters. "It's all just stuff we like, a big mix with no philosophy. Except that I like art with a sense of place. O'Keeffe had a sense of this place." □

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