BY KATHERINE LANZA LOPALO

OLIVE RUSH SANTA FE PIONEER

Olive Rush painting her father, Nixon, 1907

Nestled among the prestigious commercial galleries that line Santa Fe's historic Canyon Road stands a humble adobe farmhouse. This century-old structure was not merely a home but the creative sanctuary of Olive Rush (1873–1966), a pioneering artist whose influence on New Mexico's cultural landscape extends far beyond her canvases. For nearly half a century, the farmhouse's earthen walls witnessed the unfolding of a remarkable life — one characterized by community, exchange, and mentorship.

After decades mostly closed to the public following Rush's death, this space has been given new life. In April 2024, through the efforts of her descendants and Santa Fe supporters, the doors of the Olive Rush Studio & Art Center opened to visitors for the first time. Those who step inside discover more than preserved artifacts; they encounter the living spirit of an artist who understood that creativity flourishes most abundantly when shared. From the light-filled studio to the lush garden, every area reveals Rush's innovative approach to art-making and community-building. Visitors are gaining unprecedented access to the personal world of a woman who helped define Santa Fe's artistic identity.

A UNIQUE JOURNEY

Olive Rush was one of six children born to Nixon and Louisa Winslow Rush near Fairmount, Indiana. Her family's devout Quaker values — emphasizing simplicity, pacifism, and spiritual connection to nature — would become foundational elements in her artistic vision. Even in childhood, Rush's talent shone brightly, catching the attention

(LEFT) Rush's studio as it looks today ■ (BELOW LEFT) Rush's studio fireplace

of her father, who encouraged her to pursue art despite the limited opportunities available to women in her era.

At 16, Rush entered Indiana's Earlham College, but after only a semester, her artistic abilities were recognized and she was encouraged to move to a more challenging program. Soon her older sister Myra and brother-in-law Edgar Baldwin invited her to live with them in Washington, D.C., where Rush spent two years at the Corcoran School of Art studying under painter E.F. Andrews (1835–1915). This training opened her eyes to the possibilities beyond rural Indiana, so in 1894 she moved to New York City, enrolling at the prestigious Art Students League.

There she studied the techniques used by muralist Henry Siddons Mowbray (1858–1928) and sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907). She was most influenced by impressionist John Henry Twachtman (1853–1902), from whom she learned how to capture the ephemeral effects of light and atmosphere. These elements later became hallmarks of her style, which features delicate brushwork and a nuanced approach to color and light.

Rush quickly established financial independence through her illustration work. By 1899, she had secured commissions from such leading publications as *Scribner's Magazine*, *Century Magazine*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. Her illustrations, particularly those depicting children and animals, revealed not only technical mastery but also an emotional sensitivity that resonated with audiences and brought her commercial success rarely achieved by women of her generation.

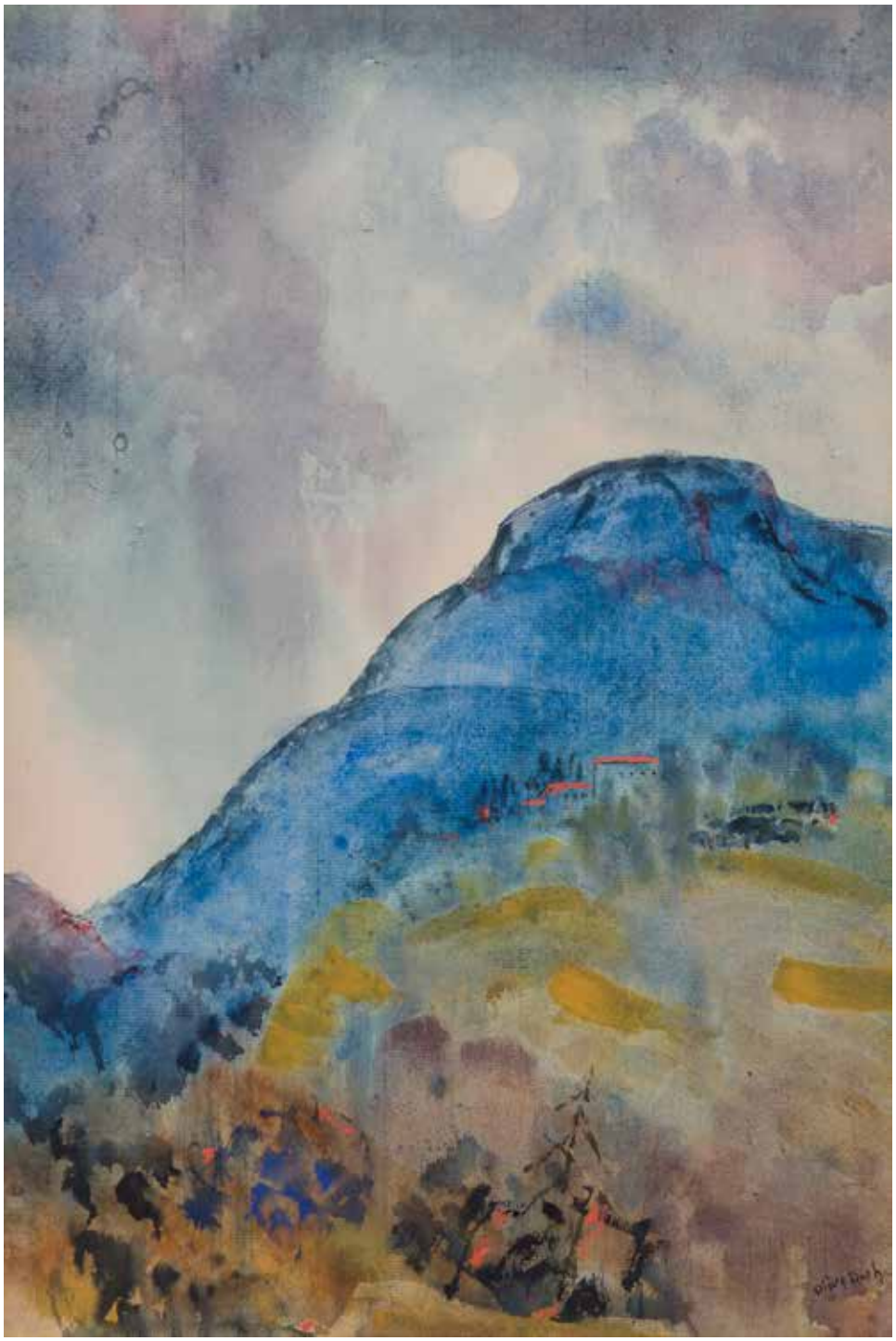
From 1904 to 1911, Rush developed her career by working with renowned illustrator Howard Pyle (1853–1911) in Wilmington, Delaware. During that time, she began experimenting with building-based art, especially stained glass and church altar paintings. She also began to study fresco painting on her own.

In 1910, Rush traveled to Europe for the first time with friend and fellow painter Alice Schille (1869–1955), heading first to the Newlyn School in Cornwall, England, and later to Paris to study with impressionist Richard E. Miller (1875–1943). Her trip was cut short by the illness of Rush's mother. She returned home and helped care for Louisa until she died several months later. After another brief sojourn in Wilmington and a stay in Boston, Rush returned to Europe in 1913, again with Schille. They went first to Antwerp and then met colleague Ethel Pennewell Brown (1878–1960) in Paris and Senlis, France. They returned to the U.S. shortly before World War I broke out.

By 1914, Rush had established herself as a significant figure, exhibiting at prestigious institutions including the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the Paris Salon. That same year, she first encountered the American Southwest on a visit with her father and sister. While on the trip, she was given a solo exhibition at Santa Fe's Palace of the Governors — the first woman offered that distinction. That initial experience of New Mexico created an enduring impression, but Rush remained in New York City and Indianapolis until she received a small inheritance a few years after her father's 1915 death. In 1920, as Santa Fe's art scene began to blossom, 47-year-old Rush purchased the charming century-old adobe farmhouse on what was then rural Canyon Road.

As Liz Kohlenberg, board chair of the Olive Rush Studio and Rush's great-niece, explains: "Olive worked hard to take her classical training

Rush's drawings hang in her dining room.



Study for *Moon Like a Flower,* c. 1949, watercolor on paper, 18 x 12 in., Olive Rush Studio & Art Center

The garden's side gate

and move it in a modern direction, while also incorporating spirit-led themes because she believed that her art, and the desire to create art, was a gift. She came to Santa Fe deliberately to be who she was and create art that reflected that." Rush transformed the front room into a studio, converting the original front door into a north-facing window, to invite both light and inspiration. Behind the main house, she ingeniously turned a modest goat shed into living quarters, frequently hosting fellow artists drawn to New Mexico's distinctive light and landscape.

Rush co-founded the Santa Fe women artists exhibition group and became friendly with local notables such as Gustave Baumann (1881–1971) and her Art Students League colleague Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986), even

(RIGHT) Behind Rush's house is her verdant garden. ■ **(FAR RIGHT)** Rush's kitchen cupboard looks just as she left it in 1966.

Deer at the Pool, c. 1950s, watercolor on paper, 16 1/4 x 13 1/2 in., Olive Rush Studio & Art Center

sharing a cat, Anselmo, with the latter. Ultimately she earned the affectionate moniker "Dean of Woman Artists in New Mexico." Yet her connections extended beyond the artistic community, as she formed meaningful relationships with Indigenous people throughout the region. Respected as both mentor and friend, she accepted invitations to their sacred celebrations and cultural events, experiences she later transformed into vibrant works of art.

Rush's art and social life centered on her magnificent garden, built on farmland that had been tended by the same family for two centuries. "The garden was integral," explains Leah Kohlenberg, Rush's great-great-grandniece, treasurer of the Olive Rush Studio, and an accomplished artist herself. "Olive was either painting or planting or picking apricots in order to can them. Today you can visit any time from April onward, and each month the garden offers a new gift." This abundance flowed naturally into Rush's legendary hospitality; she regularly opened her home to friends and neighbors, hosting informal sketching sessions and communal dinners where all were welcome.

Rush's commitment to fostering exchange found perhaps its most profound expression in her work with the Santa Fe Indian School. In 1932, its leaders approached her to paint a mural for the campus dining room, so she made a decision that perfectly embodies her philosophy as both artist and mentor. Rather than simply accepting the commission, Rush proposed something more empowering — she would teach the school's students and staff to create their own murals. An extraordinary group of young artists emerged, collectively known as the "Fresco Guild." They came from diverse tribal backgrounds — Po-woh-ge-oweenge, Ka'igwu, A´shiwi, Diné, K'úutìim'é, and Hopi'sinom — and most had never worked with oil paints. Rush's approach was revolutionary then; instead of imposing Western traditions, she encouraged them to blend new techniques with their own cultural aesthetics, creating unique expressions. In 1933, Rush helped the students showcase their talents at the Chicago World's Fair, where they painted murals for the "Mayan Temple" that captivated visitors.

The Broken Pitcher, 1932, oil on board, 29 1/2 x 18 in., Olive Rush Studio & Art Center

THE NEXT CHAPTER

When Rush passed away in 1966, her home took on a new identity as the Santa Fe Quaker Meeting House. By 2018, however, that community had outgrown the house and was considering moving elsewhere. Rush's family members remained inspired by the place, where her journals remained untouched in her desk, her personal files still nestled under the daybed.

This connection to their ancestor's legacy led the extended Rush family to establish a nonprofit organization, culminating in their acquisition of the property in 2023. Their vision for preserving Rush's legacy came to fruition last April with the opening of the Olive Rush Studio & Art Center, which now offers guided tours of the house and garden by appointment. This January, it joined the Historic Artists' Homes and Studios program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, alongside 18 other sites added during the program's 25th-anniversary year.

The spirit of cross-cultural exchange hasn't faded and in fact now flourishes at the center. "The connection between Olive and the Santa Fe Indian School feels like a living thread woven through generations," explains Liz Kohlenberg. This past April, the center celebrated that enduring relationship by hosting an exhibition featuring work by the school's current students. "What makes such exhibitions particularly meaningful is the personal connection," Kohlenberg continues. "We've met many family members of Olive's original students. It's deeply moving to introduce Olive to them, and hear them talk about who she was to their grandparents, aunts, and uncles."

Looking forward, the center is planning a docent program that will allow for more consistent public hours, as well as programming that will activate both the house and garden. The Olive Rush Studio & Art Center will sustain the process she initiated: using art as a means of bringing diverse communities together, honoring cultural heritage while fostering innovation, and recognizing that creativity flourishes most abundantly when nurtured through generosity and shared vision. ●

Information: *oliverush.org, artistshomes.org. All photos courtesy of the Olive Rush Studio & Art Center.*

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