

# PEYTON WRIGHT

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## Peter Miller

(1913-1996)

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The artist Peter Miller (1913-1996) was born Henrietta Myers. She changed her name to Peter shortly after concluding her studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1934, believing that she would be treated more fairly if the public thought her work was created by a man rather than a woman. Miller is today classified as an American Surrealist, a reputation that she earned for having shown in the early 1940s at the prestigious gallery of Julien Levy in New York, then considered the premiere showcase for Surrealist painting in the United States. Despite this affiliation, her work shared little in common with the dream and fantasy world of European Surrealists, although reviewers of her exhibitions at the Julien Levy Gallery noted the unmistakable influence of the artists Joan Miró and Paul Klee.

These same reviewers observed that she was also influenced by sources in Native American art and culture, which today we know came from the fact that she divided her time between homes in Pennsylvania and New Mexico. She first came to Santa Fe as a child, but after her marriage in 1935 to Earle C. Miller, a fellow student at the Academy, she and her husband built a ranch in Española, about 25 miles north of Santa Fe (they purchased 85 acres, which allowed them to lease an additional five thousand acres from the Bureau of Land Management). From that point onward, they considered New Mexico their spiritual home. They were neighbors of the indigenous people of the Tewa Pueblo, whose crafts and religious beliefs fascinated her. The reliance of Native Americans upon the land and the animals who occupied it permeated her work for the remaining years of her career. Just as they believed that the creatures who surrounded them—birds, turtles, lizards, snakes—could serve as intermediaries in their communication with the gods of the underworld, Miller appropriated these same symbols in her paintings, along with abstract signs that she extrapolated from their pottery and petroglyphs.

Miller painted at her studio near San Ildefonso, New Mexico, as well as completing works on her farm in Pennsylvania. The Peyton Wright Gallery exhibits of 2021 and 2022 ("Coming Home" and "Coming Home Again") drew attention to paintings from her true "spiritual home" in New Mexico. Stylistically, reviewers of Miller's exhibition at the Julien Levy gallery in the 1940s noted a reference to the works of Miró, Klee and Picasso, further recognizing her themes/subjects were drawn from sources in Native American art and culture. This rapport existed because of Miller's intimate familiarity with the customs, rituals and ceremonies of the Tewa, to which she was given unique access through of her friendship with Tilano Montoya, a Native American from the San Ildefonso Pueblo who was the companion of the writer Mary Warner, one of Peter Miller's closest friends living in New Mexico at the time.

Until recently, Peter Miller had been yet another undiscovered figure within the history of American modernism; a lacuna the 2021 exhibition "Coming Home" rectified with wide critical acclaim and numerous acquisitions by collectors and curators alike. This continued exposure will

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draw her paintings to the attention of a whole new generation of critics, curators, historians, and collectors, finally giving her the recognition and critical acclaim she and her work rightly deserve.

[2021 Albuquerque Journal - Exhibition Preview by Kathaleen Roberts](https://www.abqjournal.com/2432608/exhibit-to-feature-works-by-peter-miller.html)

[Pasatiempo - 2021 Exhibition Preview by Michael Abatemarco](https://www.santafenewmexican.com/pasatiempo/art/an-ineffable-quality-peter-miller-coming-home/article_71bef8c4-1ae6-11ec-8385-af85a94d6085.html)