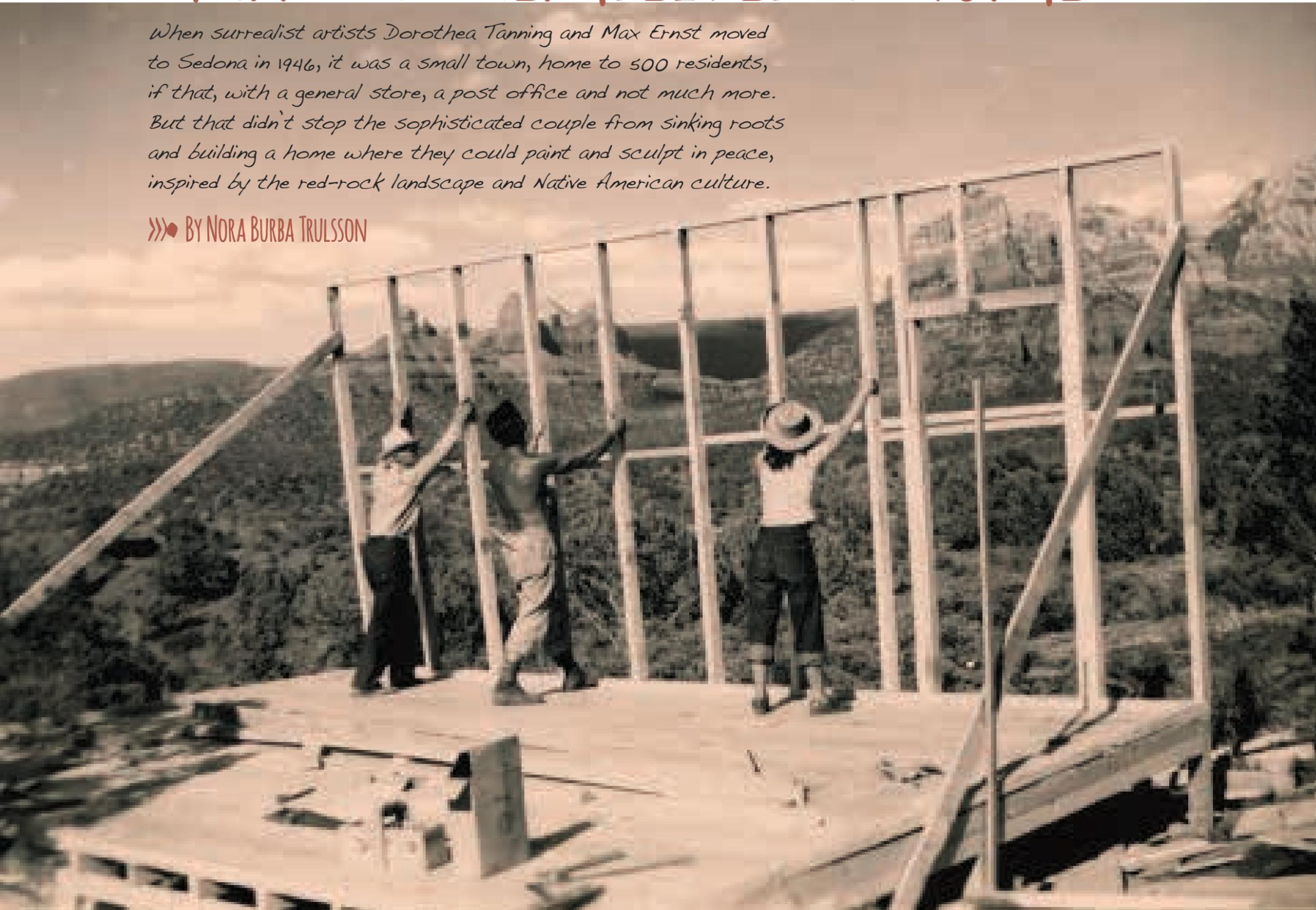


MAKING THEMSELVES* AT HOME

When surrealist artists Dorothea Tanning and Max Ernst moved to Sedona in 1946, it was a small town, home to 500 residents, if that, with a general store, a post office and not much more. But that didn't stop the sophisticated couple from sinking roots and building a home where they could paint and sculpt in peace, inspired by the red-rock landscape and Native American culture.

»»» BY NORA BURBA TRULSSON



THE HOUSE IS still there, down the twists and turns of a narrow road, within walking distance of uptown Sedona. You can't see much of it from the street. Junipers and brush hide the house, and it looks much different now than it did when it was built in 1946. It's been sold numerous times, expanded, modernized. The studio's long gone.

The house, though, is a special site, a vortex of history and art, built by surrealist artists Dorothea Tanning and Max Ernst as a retreat where they could paint and sculpt in peace, inspired by the red-rock landscape and Native American culture.

The couple's path to Sedona, a place they first visited in the summer of 1943, has as many twists and turns as does the road to their home. Their trajectory zigzags between the Midwest and war-torn Europe, then ricochets from New York to Los Angeles. Their sojourn to Sedona also is the story of two very strong individuals who were meant to be together.

Born in Galesburg, Illinois, in 1910 as the middle of three sisters, Tanning had, by all accounts, a solidly middle-class, Midwestern upbringing. At a young age, she aspired to be an artist, and she once rented a cabin by a lake so she could be alone with her art — a decision that no doubt raised eyebrows in the 1920s, especially in a town dotted with churches. Her family went along with her headstrong proclivities. "The family believed that art and culture were important," says Tanning's niece, Mimi Johnson, a New York-based performing-arts administrator. "They were supportive. Her father, who was a postal worker, sent her money when he could."

After a stint at Knox College, Tanning headed to Chicago, where she spent hours at the Art Institute. "She was a sponge," Johnson says. "Dorothea absorbed everything, observed everything and spat it back in her work." By 1936, Tanning was in New York, working as a commercial artist and pursuing fine art, when she saw an exhibit of dadaism and surrealism at the Museum of Modern Art. The show changed her life. "Here in the museum, is the real explosion, rocking me on my run-over heels," she wrote in her autobiography, *Between Lives*. "Here is the infinitely faceted world I must have been waiting for."

In 1939, on the eve of World War II, Tanning traveled to Paris to meet some of the surrealists, taking letters of introduction to artists Yves Tanguy, Pablo Picasso and Ernst. Because of the annual summer exodus and wartime anxiety, Paris was empty. Tanning returned to New York without meeting the artists, but her luck changed when she signed with the Julien Levy Gallery, a cutting-edge firm known

Sedona is a long way from Germany or Chicago, but that didn't stop Dorothea Tanning and Max Ernst from settling down there — in a house they built themselves — after World War II.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE DOROTHEA TANNING COLLECTION & ARCHIVE

for representing avant-garde artists.

While Tanning was exploring her earliest artistic expressions, Ernst already was a star — first in the dada art movement, then in surrealism. He was born in Brühl, Germany, in 1891 to a devoutly middle-class Catholic family. Inspired by his father, an amateur artist, Ernst took up painting at a young age, then studied art history and psychology at the University of Bonn. He served in World War I, married and had a son, Jimmy Ernst, who emigrated to the United States as a young man and also became an artist.

Always a bit of a rebel, Ernst left for Paris in the early 1920s and became immersed in the bohemian lifestyle of artists, writers, poets and filmmakers, working and socializing with a circle that included Joan Miró, André Breton, Paul Éluard, Alberto Giacometti, Luis Buñuel and others. His work was exhibited widely.

With piercing blue eyes, Ernst was charming, handsome and mesmerizing, which didn't make for great husband material. He had numerous affairs, many with boldface names of that generation: singer/actress Lotte Lenya, Gala Éluard (who later married Salvador Dalí) and artist Leonora Carrington. "My grandfather loved beautiful women," says Amy Ernst, Jimmy Ernst's daughter, also an artist in New York. "He put women on pedestals." It was yet another lover, arts patron and heiress Peggy Guggenheim, who helped Ernst come to New York in 1941. They married a year later.

New York during the early 1940s was a hotbed of exiled European artists and intellectuals, many of whom orbited the Julien Levy Gallery, where Tanning showed. Guggenheim, with a major collection of modern art, also was part of the scene, but on a whim, she decided to search for a locale besides New York to house her collection.

With Ernst and his son, Jimmy, in tow, she headed for San Francisco and Los Angeles. Driving back, they crossed Arizona, where Ernst bought every kachina at a Grand Canyon trading post. In his autobiography, *A Not-So-Still Life*, Jimmy Ernst wrote: "On a late afternoon, we got out of the car to watch a gigantic rattlesnake crossing U.S. 66 just outside of Flagstaff, Arizona. As Max looked up at nearby San Francisco Peak [sic], he blanched visibly, his face muscles tightened. The mountain's green tree line abruptly gave way to a band of bright-red rock beneath a peak cap of sun-created pure magenta. He was staring at the very same fantastic landscape that he had repeatedly painted in Ardèche, France, not very long ago, without knowing of its actual existence. That one look was to change the future of his life in America."

The trio returned to New York, where Guggenheim decided to curate an exhibit of work by women artists, enlisting Ernst to help find the artists. In 1942, he went to see Tanning's work at her studio for inclusion in the show. They played chess. He came back to Tanning's with a suitcase. Guggenheim was not amused.

Tanning and Ernst took a trip to Sedona in 1943, inspired by Ernst's previous visit to Arizona. "They each rented cabins in Oak Creek Canyon," Johnson says, "because they were not married at the time." In fact, both still were married — Ernst to Guggenheim and Tanning to her first husband. Guggenheim, to partially assuage her humiliation at her impending divorce, penned a scathing memoir with thinly veiled references to Ernst and Tanning that was widely read in New York art circles. Between the memoir, a bout of encephalitis that Tanning suffered and a desire to live in the West, Ernst and Tanning moved to Sedona for a fresh start in 1946, subletting her New York apartment to Marcel Duchamp. As

soon as their divorces were finalized, the couple got married in Beverly Hills in a double ceremony with photographer Man Ray and dancer Juliet Browner, longtime friends.

At the time, Sedona was a small town, home to 500 residents, if that, with a general store, a post office and not much more. Shopping or going to the movies meant trekking to Flagstaff or Cottonwood. Sedona's appeal as a tourist destination was yet to come, and Ernst and Tanning, along with artists Robert and Mary Kittredge, essentially made up the town's nascent art colony.

Using Tanning's savings, the couple bought land from Charlie Brewer and began building a modest cabin, naming the property Capricorn Hill. There was no water or electricity at the time. They chased off Brewer's cattle and dealt with rattlers, scorpions and oppressive heat. "I've always thought of my aunt as so sophisticated and glamorous," Johnson says. "It's hard to imagine the woman I knew basically camping there in Sedona, but all they needed was love."

Eventually, electricity and water came to the house, which they expanded. Ernst had a small studio in the back; Tanning painted in the main house, listening to Igor Stravinsky on their phonograph. Their work took inspiration and hues from the desert landscape, as well as from Native American imagery. The house was adorned inside and out with bas-relief sculpture, paintings and collections of indigenous art. Tanning did one of her most famous paintings there, *Self-Portrait*, an image of a small figure in a vast desert, while Ernst also created his most iconic sculpture, *Capricorn*, in Sedona.

When they weren't immersed in artwork, they explored, boating the Colorado River or traveling to the Hopi mesas. They were also visited by friends from the art world, passing through on their way to New York or Los Angeles. Visitors included artists Tanguy and Duchamp, choreographer George Balanchine, and photographers Lee Miller and Henri Cartier-Bresson. The poet Dylan Thomas became enamored with the Bridgeport Tavern in Cottonwood when he visited Ernst and Tanning. The couple also participated in Hans Richter's avant-garde film *8 x 8*, which was partly filmed in Arizona.

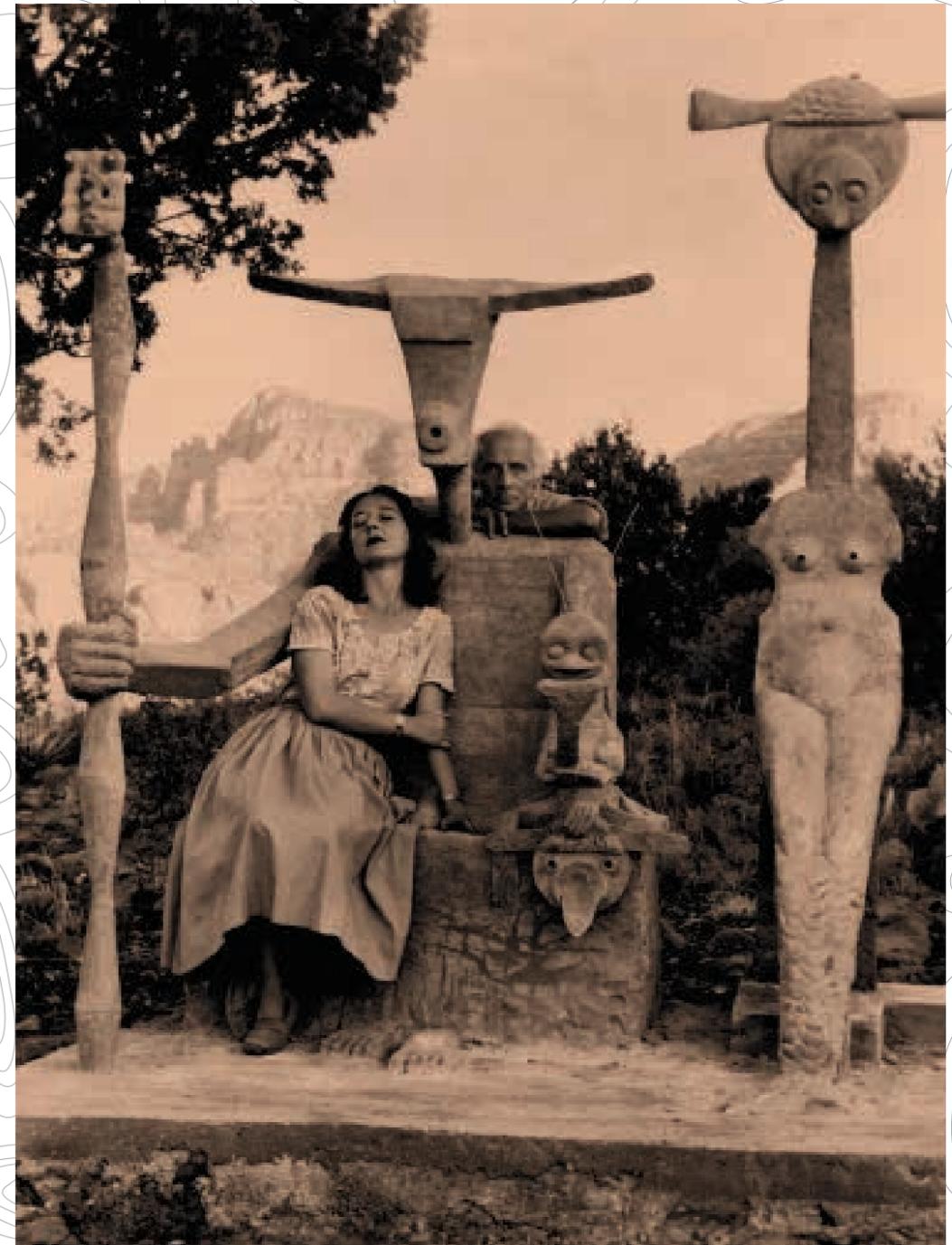
Ernst and Tanning mingled in the local scene, mentoring sculptor Nassan Gobran, who came to teach at the Verde Valley School and later founded the Sedona Arts Center. Ernst and Robert Kittredge — perhaps on a lark — entered artwork in the 1951 Arizona State Fair. Each took home a ribbon.

"They liked their anonymity in Sedona," says Amy Ernst of her grandfather and Tanning. "They stayed there because they were fascinated by primitive cultures and by the landscape. For them, the Southwest was a mystical place."

During the years they lived in Sedona, they made numerous trips to New York with a trusty Ford and a trailer filled with art. They also spent time in France, a place where both felt their art was most appreciated. In 1957, they decided to move to France permanently. It was there that their artwork received even more international recognition.

They sold the Sedona house to Jimmy Ernst, who lived there with his family in the early 1960s. "My father worked in the studio out back," Amy Ernst says. "At one point, the federal government told him that the studio's broom closet was on government land and they wanted him to move the studio. Dad refused and simply chopped off the broom closet."

Tanning gave a piece of the land to her sister, Mary Louise John-



"We had a wonderful life there," Ernst, with Tanning at Capricorn Hill, said of the couple's time in Sedona. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE DOROTHEA TANNING COLLECTION & ARCHIVE

son, Mimi Johnson's mother, who built a house there. Ernst and Tanning visited together at least once, in 1973. After Ernst's death in 1976 in France, Tanning moved back to New York to pursue her art, which began to include sculpture and, later, poetry and writing. She visited her sister several times in Sedona, usually accompanied by Mimi Johnson. "I think the last time she visited was 1998 or 1999," Johnson says. "She used to say that the rocks were in the wrong places because there was no Interstate 17 or Highway 179 when they lived there. They used to come in through Jerome or Flagstaff." Tanning died in New York last year, at the age of 101.

Ernst summarized their years in Sedona in Peter Schamoni's 1991 documentary film *Max Ernst*. "We had a wonderful life there," Ernst says. "It was absolutely marvelous. Words fail me when I try to describe it. The climate was wonderful. The people we met there were so different from the sophisticated New Yorkers. They were simply terrific cowboys or artists."

The Phoenix Art Museum has several pieces by Max Ernst in its collection. *Sedona Relief*, a 1948 bronze, currently is on display. For more information on Dorothea Tanning, visit www.dorotheatanning.org. For more information on Max Ernst, visit www.maxernstmuseum.lvr.de. [AH](#)