



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

BUILDING AN AMERICAN LEGACY: The National Arts Club

by Elaine Adams

EACH ARTIST POSSESSES A multitude of traits that, when combined, create a unique individual with a special gift to express personal observations and ideas through aesthetic means. However, among these many traits it is unusual to find an artist with an attribute for bureaucracy or administration. Yet, out of the inherent need to band together, artists have found ways to structure successful group alliances with like-minded comrades. As a result, there are hundreds of art organizations operating today throughout the country — but, only a few that hold the honour of being recorded in history.

The National Arts Club, located in the heart of New York's Gramercy Park district, was founded in 1898 by the art and literary critic of the *New York Times*, Charles de Kay (1848-1935). De Kay's goal was to educate the public on the merits of national art. At the time, it was popular for wealthy Americans to amass their art collections with acquisitions made from abroad. The National Arts Club was thus conceived to bring together some of America's foremost artists and connoisseurs in hopes of encouraging a widespread support for national artists.

Among the distinguished panel of seventeen appointed to the Organizing Committee were John W. Beatty, Director of Fine Arts at the Carnegie Institute; J.G. Brown, President of the American Society of Water Colorists; James W. Ellsworth, prominent Chicago art patron; Daniel C. Gilman, President of Johns Hopkins University; Halsey C. Ives, Director



Harry Willson Watrous (1857-1940)
Some Little Talk of Me and Thee There Was
Oil on canvas 27" × 42"

of St. Louis School and Museum of Fine Arts; John La Farge, President of the Society of Mural Painters; Charles R. Lamb, Vice President of the Architectural League of New York; Allan Marquand, Professor of Art at Princeton University; George B. Post, President of American Institute of Architects; A.B. Trowbridge, Professor of Architecture at Cornell University; J.Q.A. Ward, President of the National Sculpture Society; and Thomas W. Wood, President of the National Academy of Design. The first officers were installed and the Club became a private corporation in October of 1899, with architect George B. Post as its first President.

The premiere order of business was to develop a membership. De Kay, along with the Organizing



The Northwest Parlour of The National Arts Club. Art work, from left to right include painting by Philip Lesley Hale, sculpture of nude by NAC current member Mark Mellon, painting by William Ritschell, relief sculpture of NAC founding member Spencer Trask by Victor Brenner, sculpture by Malvena Hoffman, and paintings by Harry Hoffman and Robert Vonnob. Not visible in this photo is a sculpture by Anna Hyatt Huntington. Photo: Joe Standart

Committee, launched an ambitious campaign. The strategy was to send letters to the nation's leading artists, collectors, museum directors, dealers, writers, editors, and businessmen, inviting them to join the new National Arts Club. The campaign was an immediate success and resulted in enrolling 1,200 charter members, including many prominent arts patrons, such as **Benjamin Altman**, **Samuel P. Avery** and **Henry Clay Frick**.

Art clubs address a variety of interests ranging from art instruction to exhibition opportunities. They typically offer critique sessions and art demonstrations, as well as competitions, group painting activities, and art tours. However, the primary function of an art club is to provide a conducive environment for social gatherings.

By furnishing artists with exhibition and social opportunities, art clubs can become catalysts for new ideas and even bona fide art movements. Since the National Arts Club's early years, sub clubs evolved within the umbrella club. **The Discus** was a debating club, while **The Vagabonds** was a group for professional literati. **The Men's Open Table** offered a variety of lecture topics, and from this same concept the **Women's Open Table** was developed.

IMMEDIATELY UPON INCEPTION, THE NATIONAL Arts Club began to sponsor a variety of unique exhibitions, including stained glass, jewelry, art pottery, and Japanese prints. In 1902 the Club held the exhibition, *American Pictorial Photographs*, featuring **Alfred Stieglitz**. The following year, was a view-

ing of sculpture by **Auguste Rodin**. In 1904 the Club showed a series of paintings that later became recognized by art historians as a pivotal event. The exhibition was held at the Club's second headquarters located at 39 West 34th Street, and featured a group of six young artists, **Arthur B. Davies**, **William Glackens**, **Robert Henri**, **George Luks**, **Maurice Prendergast** and **John Sloan**. A *New York Times* art reviewer titled the exhibition as, "Six Impressionists: Startling Works by Red-Hot American Painters." Later, this group of painters would be joined by **Ernest Lawson** and **Everett Shinn**, and together, they would be known as the "Eight" and founders of the *Ash Can School*, a social realist movement that often depicted coarse city scenes, including squalid back allies, complete with trash cans.

One critic in 1908 referred to the "Eight" as "The Black Gang," so named for their preference in using a dark palette. Although their paintings were done in a loose, impressionistic style, they did not consider themselves "Impressionists," and were averse to light-filled paintings. In reality, they reacted against the highly successful **Ten American Painters**, established eleven years earlier and whose illustrious roster of artists included **William Merritt Chase**, **Childe Hassam** and Bostonians, **Frank Benson** and **Edmund Tarbell**. As Impressionists, the Ten were interested in interpreting effects of light, whether in landscapes, city scenes or portraits, they generally depicted their subjects in a high key. However, the Club welcomed both styles of painting, whether created by the "Eight" or the "Ten."

IN 1906 THE CLUB MOVED TO ITS PERMANENT headquarters — the **Governor Samuel J. Tilden Mansion** located in Gramercy Park, the only private park in New York City. Immediately, the President of the Club, architect **George B. Post**, executed plans to construct a twelve-story building on the site of Mr. Tilden's gardens to accommodate artists' studios, exhibition galleries and dining rooms. More rooms also meant more space to show art.

In 1909 The National Arts Club began their own art collection when **William T. Evans (1843-1918)**, chairman of the Art Committee and an active collector himself, initiated the **Artist Life Membership Program**. During his tenure, which he held from 1910 until his death in 1918, he actively pursued renowned painters and sculptors to join the Club. The collection was very much directed in Evans' own preference,

which was in *Tonalism*, *Realism*, and especially *Impressionism*. He was even involved with selecting many of the artists' diploma works. After the death of **William Evans**, the Club's collection continued to expand with an emphasis on traditionalism.

Harry Willson Watrous' diploma painting, *Some Little Talk of Me and Thee There was*, is a prime example of the type of work that won him acclaim in New York's art society. This particular painting was published on the cover of the March 1, 1911 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal*. The title of the painting is a reference to a passage from **Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyat**, in which the Persian poet describes the intrigues of upper-class women. Watrous' particular style was influenced by the French military and genre painter, **Jean-Louis Meissonier (1815-1891)**, a master of the European Academic technique.

Boston painter and member of The American Ten, **William McGregor Paxton**, was elected to Artist Life Membership with his diploma painting,



William McGregor Paxton (1869-1941)

The Shade Hat, 1912

Oil on canvas 30" x 35"



Charles Courtney Curran (1861-1942)
Early Morning Madison Square (The Dewey Arch), 1900
 Oil on canvas 22" x 18"

The Shade Hat. The portrait, which depicts a young lady fussing with her frilly hat, was painted in the Impressionist style and was the type of graceful subject that was the accepted artistic mode of the time. Paxton studied in Paris with the celebrated academic Orientalist painter, Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904). Colin Campbell Cooper, who made his mark in both New York and California, was also elected a Life Artist Member. Cooper's painterly views of Manhattan won him much praise, and the Club has a fine example of one of his bustling city scenes in the painting, *South Ferry, New York*.

There are several choice paintings in the Club's collection that celebrate life in New York. In Charles Courtney Curran's painting, *Early Morn-*

ing, Madison Square, (The Dewey Arch), the uniformed street sweepers are shown busily tiding up the square before the hustle and bustle of the day begins. Besides the American Impressionists, the Club also welcomed western artists, including Frederic Remington and Ernest L. Blumenschein. Blumenschein became an Artist Life Member in 1916, and was well recognized for his paintings of New Mexico, where in 1915, he helped found the Taos Society of Artists.

The National Arts Club's membership peaked at 1,800 in 1920, and began to decline after the Great Depression and World War II. It then levelled off at 600 members, where it remained for nearly thirty years. In 1985 the Club began to experience a revitalization under O. Aldon James, Jr., who continues as their current and sixteenth President. Upon his election, Mr. James was recognized as the youngest president in the Club's illustrious history. He soon implemented an active membership campaign, which, to this date, has resulted in listing 2,000 names onto their roster — their highest level ever. Fifty percent of the membership consists of professionals in various artistic fields, including painting, sculpting, photography, architecture, dance, poetry, and literature.

THOSE WHO VISIT THE NATIONAL ARTS Club for the first time, are instantly charmed by its old-world ambience. Upon entering, one settles into the richness and warmth of the black walnut panelled walls and magnificent stained glass windows designed by John La Farge. The style is very much inspired by the *Aesthetic Movement* or *Beaux Arts*. The interior is decorated with antique Persian rugs and Victorian furniture, each chair or sofa is upholstered in perfectly worn silks and velvets. In the Club's bar, one is further intoxicated by the glorious vaulted glass dome created by Boston's celebrated glazier, Donald MacDonald. The magnificent north-facing bay windows in two of the parlours allow the warmth of the sun to pour into the Club, while offering members a grand view of Gramercy Park.

The air of eccentricity abounds within these hallowed walls, as artists, poets and writers mingle with politicians and businessmen to philosophize

on a blend of lofty ideals. In the dining facilities, members enjoy feasting on fine cuisine amid paintings by **Carl Anderson, Walter Forndon, Louis Loeb, Ernest Roth, and Sigurd Skou**. On the upper floors are also headquarters to other renowned art clubs, including the **Pastel Society of America** and the **Poet Society of America**. On the lower floor, one is confronted with the sounds of bonging billiard balls as a well-known artist and his patron are in the middle of a heated game that may likely last into the early hours of the morning.

The Club promotes a feeling of stability and a sense of belonging. Here, in New York City, where life can be hurried, time seems to refreshingly digress at the Club. Over the last 130 years, the National Arts Club building has comfortably nestled itself into its surroundings. "We have become a Fabergé Egg here in Gramercy Park." Says Aldon James. "We are a small treasure that offers many surprises." The neighbourhood itself is filled with rich history. Next door to the Club is the famous **Players' Club**, a private society for luminaries in theatre and film. Up the road is what was once the home of **President Theodore Roosevelt**, also nearby was the home of **Elsie de Wolfe**, history's first professional interior designer. The area continues to be populated with creative types of every media. The uniqueness of this location so inspired the author **Carol Klein** that she wrote the book, *Gramercy Park: An American Bloomsbury*.

With the recent savage attacks on New York City, it is now more important than ever that American artists speak with a clear and unified voice that articulates our national beliefs and morals. It is at this time that we especially appreciate the National Arts Club — a 104 year-old institution that has continued as a beacon for high standards in American art. In the words of founder, Charles de Kay, it is through "national scope" and "liberal spirit," that the Club can "exert a far reaching influence for good on art in the United States and help to make the excellence of American work felt by the government and the people."

Notes:

Research for this article was gathered through the catalogue, A Noble Tradition: American Painting from The National Arts Club Permanent Collection by Carol Lowrey, to accompany the 1995 exhibition of the same title shown at the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme, Connecticut.

Additional research was gathered from Impressionist New York by William H. Gerds, Ph.D., published in 1994 by Abbeville Press, New York, ISBN# 1-55859-328-4. We also wish to thank Janice G. Fremolaro, Assistant to O. Alden James and Executive Director of the National Arts Club, and Carol Lowrey, Curator of the National Arts Club Permanent Collection for their assistance in gathering material for this article.

Some Facts about The National Arts Club

by Beverly Russell

IF BUILDINGS COULD SPEAK, THE TWO brownstones at 14 and 15 Gramercy Park South in New York City — the home of the **National Arts Club** — would disclose untold legends about art and artists and politics as well. Once the residence of New York State **Governor Samuel Tilden**, (1814-1886), who commissioned distinguished architect **Calvert Vaux** (1824-1895), to convert the two homes into one grand mansion in the 1870s, it was here on a second floor balcony that the Governor accepted the Presidency of the United States in 1876 on behalf of the Democratic Party. Like the recent election in 2000, it was a short-lived victory. The following January after recounts declared him losing by one elec-

toral vote to Republican **Rutherford Hayes**, Governor Tilden conceded to avoid a civil war.

After his death in 1896, the **Tilden House**, with its magnificent high-ceiling rooms, stained glass detailing, majestic staircase and fireplace carvings by Italian craftsmen, eventually came on the market. The National Arts Club, chartered in 1898, and the first club to admit women on an equal footing with men, (other New York clubs such as **The Century** didn't catch up until almost 100 years later in the 1980s), was ready to move from its first home on West 34th Street. The story goes that club treasurer **Spencer Trask** was so convinced that the Tilden House was the right place, that he put down

some of his own money to bind the bargain. (His estate, **Yaddo**, later became America's first artists' retreat). The Board of Trustees ultimately arranged to acquire the property in 1906 and **Charles Tollinson Lamb**, one of the original Board members and a decorative architect, was given the assignment of adapting the Tilden House to the needs of an arts club. He did it so skillfully that none of the extraordinary elements of the building were lost.

Faced with expansive wall space, the club invited members to present a painting or a piece of sculpture worth at least \$1,000 at the time (circa 1910). They then became Life Members, which meant that they did not have to pay dues. As a consequence, the Club's fine arts collection is wonderfully representative of various artistic styles of the period.

CALVERT VAUX, WHO BEGAN HIS CAREER IN London as a landscape architect believed that great design came from nature, and evidence of this artistic principle is found throughout the building, particularly in the stained glass panel motifs and fireplace carvings in the Club's sitting rooms. It was these rooms that provided some authentic background for the **Martin Scorsese** movie rendition of **Edith Wharton's** novel *Age of Innocence*. The Club acquired dramatic new red velvet draperies for the floor-to-ceiling bay windows as a result of this location filming.

The former Tilden House dining room is now the club's Grand Gallery, one of the largest exhibition spaces in New York City outside of a museum. It is here that the National Arts Club *Gold Medal* dinners are held, seating 200 club members and their guests under a glistening, grand chandelier. The annual gala honours contemporary artists in the fields of art, music, literature, theatre and drama, film, video and photography. In the tradition of the Club, there is also an annual Gold Medal to honour a distinguished patron or collector of the arts. Smaller gatherings, educational events and seminars are also held in the now enclosed Sculpture Court.

In the last decade under the Presidency of **O. Aldon James, Jr.**, the Club has cast out any feeling of musty history and become a thriving, hive of artistic activity. For example the monthly calendar is likely to list as many as fifteen different events, book signings, exhibitions, readings, film showings,

and lectures. This past April a lecture on the *Vermeer and Delft School* by **Tomlyn Barnes**, coincided with an exhibit on view at the **Metropolitan Museum of Art** through May 27, 2001. The winners of the **NAC Voice Competition** were heard in an operatic concert, (annual prizes of \$5000, \$3000 and \$1000 are awarded to aspiring opera singers from all over the country), and an evening was devoted to the French academic painter **Jean-Léon Gérôme** and **Goupil & Cie**, the noted 19th century art dealer and publisher, presented by **Dr. David Farmer**, Director of the **Dahesh Museum** in New York.

The Club has attracted an ever-increasing list of younger members who participate in most of the important club functions, and are known for putting on unusually gregarious evenings around the holidays. After a century in existence, the great and sustaining strength of the National Arts Club is the dedication, spirit and tireless efforts of its members. It is a club that retains national respect. In 1962, it was designated a **New York City Landmark** by the Community Trust and a plaque was attached to its facade. In 1976, the National Parks Service of the Department of the Interior designated the property a **National Historic Landmark** in recognition of its preservation of Samuel Tilden's mansion. To walk through its bevelled glass doors is to retread history and to savour the energy of thousands of great artists who have crossed the threshold.

Notes:

The National Arts Club is located at 15 Gramercy Park South, New York, NY 10003; telephone: 212/475-3424. The Club is a private organization, however, membership considerations are available either through sponsorship by two current members or by writing a letter expressing interest in becoming a member. Both procedures require review by the Admissions Committee. Annual dues vary, depending on one's level of membership.

Beverly Russell has been a member of the National Arts Club since 1991. Her illustrious career includes Editor-in-Chief of Interiors Magazine, and author of numerous books on design and architecture, as well as several books focusing on women of achievement.